JANUARY 17 2026

FT Weekend Magazine

Without my fitness tracker I'd never have run so far. Or behaved so weirdly. By Tim Harford

Ours jjumps

When Johannes Janke (JJ to us) designed our first jumping hour (September 2011) it was a horological leap. It didn't jump moments before, or after, the minute hand's completed rotation. But precisely on the hour. Our **C1 Jump Hour Mk V**'s 'stepped', mostly sapphire glass-made hand accentuates this functionality. And being part-filled with luminescence, like the jump hour disc itself, it's highly visible at night. Jjoy, eh?

Do your research

Christopher
Ward

christopherward.com

FT Weekend Magazine

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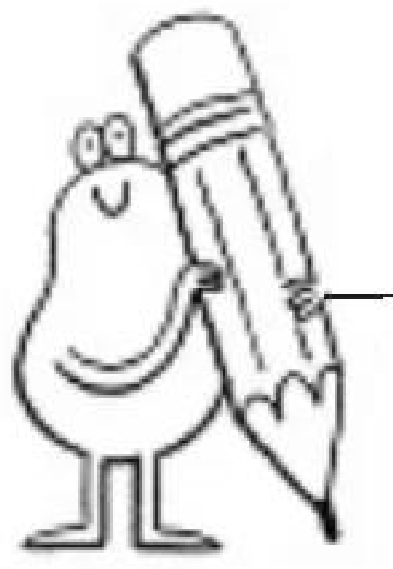

MARGINALIA *by* NADINE REDLICH

ON THE COVER
ILLUSTRATION *by* SERGE SEIDLITZ

KENNETH LAM

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Letters

ELEVEN PHOTOGRAPHERS EXPLORE THE IDEA OF HOME

These are terrific! Really varied ideas and styles.

PM1 VIA FT.COM

THE LITTLE-KNOWN STORY OF GIACOMETTI'S RURAL RETREAT

by Lily Le Brun

The breadth of what I read in the FT is a constant pleasure. Thanks for another wonderful article. Must visit Stampa on our next trip down the Val Bregaglia.

AMBRA VIA FT.COM

↩ The Zurich police station, a five-minute walk from Zurich Hauptbahnhof main station, houses magnificent Giacometti frescoes by Augusto, cousin of Giovanni, walk-in free entry. Villa Planta in Chur Bündner Kunstmuseum exhibits works of Giovanni, Alberto, Diego and Augusto Giacometti, a short train journey from Zurich HB. If time permits, another train and PostBus from Chur connect to Alberto Giacometti Museum in Sent, where Romansh is spoken.

ABSOLUT WOMAN VIA FT.COM

HOW BRITISH QUEUES GOT OUT OF HAND

by Tim Harford

Good article! The points about having a little spare capacity are hugely important. The director of a large and busy site once told me: "If you are aiming for 100 per cent efficiency, you will be inefficient. Eighty per cent is the optimum."

This is lost, I fear, by people transfixed by the pursuit of ever-more data and setting targets for unit managers.

TRUNDLER VIA FT.COM

I get some kind of incredible dopamine rush reading about queues. Lovely discussion of Erlang.

REEDO VIA FT.COM

DEPARTMENTS

Usually, I appreciate very much the miscellany unearthed in Departments. This weekend, however, it was disappointing to spot an error in the transcription of one of Ben Schott's German words.

Rather than *Enlistungsfreude*, the correct spelling is *Entlistungsfreude*. The bracketed translation into English – de-listing-joy – encapsulates the German prefix: *ent* conveying something that is removed or undone.

It is to be hoped that texts such as Schott's will throw light on the wonders of German and its evolving usages.

MICHÈLE SEDGWICK, LONDON

DEFINING DONALD TRUMP

by Simon Kuper

Simon Kuper joins the burgeoning cottage industry of those trying to define what Donald Trump is. This is a distraction. Instead describe what he does. Donald Trump is anti-democratic. Words beyond this are superfluous.

GUY WROBLE, DENVER, COLORADO

I'M IN WITH THE OUT-CROWD

by Marina O'Loughlin

I'm in with Marina O'Loughlin. Soon after lockdown one November, I whimsically booked a midweek break to celebrate my birthday in a small Sicilian town, reserving lunch at a two-star Michelin restaurant.

On arrival at 1pm, the door was locked and after ringing the bell, we entered an empty restaurant. We were then served by the sole chef and the sommelier.

PAUL MITCHELL, LONDON

My philosophy entirely! Off to Japan now. But please don't encourage the others, or travelling "off-off" will be just as ruined as "on-on".

THEINFORMER VIA FT.COM

Granada (and the Alhambra) was super in December: warm, sunny, no queues. I just turned up and bought a ticket. Super-helpful staff; local places to eat were full of… locals! Great vibe.

NUTSHELLN VIA FT.COM

WHY MADEIRA IS MY DESERT ISLAND WINE

by Jancis Robinson

The best way to get Madeira for a reasonable price is to visit the island itself. I went in November 2024 for some winter sun and it was ideal. A steady 20C and sunny for the entire trip, a week in the incredibly pretty Quinta Bela Vista plus flights for about £720 per person, and the island is stunningly beautiful. The locals are friendly, and at that time of year it was quiet.

I remember being jealous at seeing French beans growing next to a banana tree. If you're a gardener, it's paradise as you can grow almost anything there. If ever I retire somewhere warm, Madeira would be a good candidate.

I also stopped by Blandy's and bought a bottle of their less expensive wine, which I enjoyed a lot, so I shall invest more when I go back.

LE CASQUE VIA FT.COM

What a superbly informative column and a brilliant opening sentence. Thank you!

SAMJOHNSON VIA FT.COM

Thanks for reminding us finance folks of all the beauty that is out there in the world, far from monitors and spreadsheets.

ALESSANDRO AVERCHI VIA FT.COM

MULTIVERSE OF CARIBBEAN COOKING

by Jay Rayner

Oh man I'm hungry now and not even out of bed yet. 😫 jerk for breakfast seems like an excellent idea.

VANWEST VIA FT.COM

Good to see that Jay didn't have to even walk a full circle of Brockwell Park for this week's column. I look forward to trying both restaurants. Best of luck to them.

POL ROGER VIA FT.COM

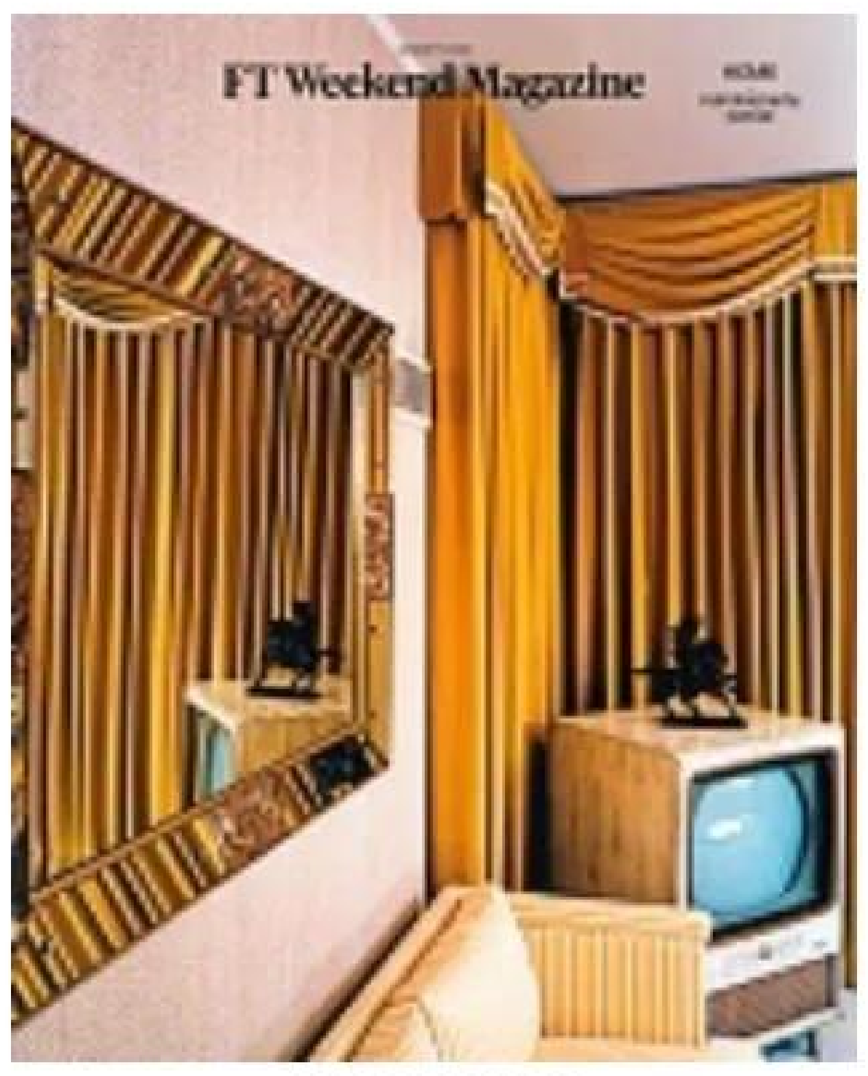
IS IT TIME FOR A DIGITAL DETOX?

by Robert Shrimsley

Another benefit of drastically cutting your social media consumption is that you deprive your mind of easy distraction, making the more difficult kind of mental activities more attractive.

I find that since I deleted Facebook, X and Insta, and restricted Bluesky to a once-a-week treat, I go through my book reading list a lot faster, and have markedly improved my ability not just to read but to remember and create patterns between my various reads. Amazing how much excessive consumption of digital media stifles the mind.

GUILLAUME ESQ VIA FT.COM



JANUARY 10
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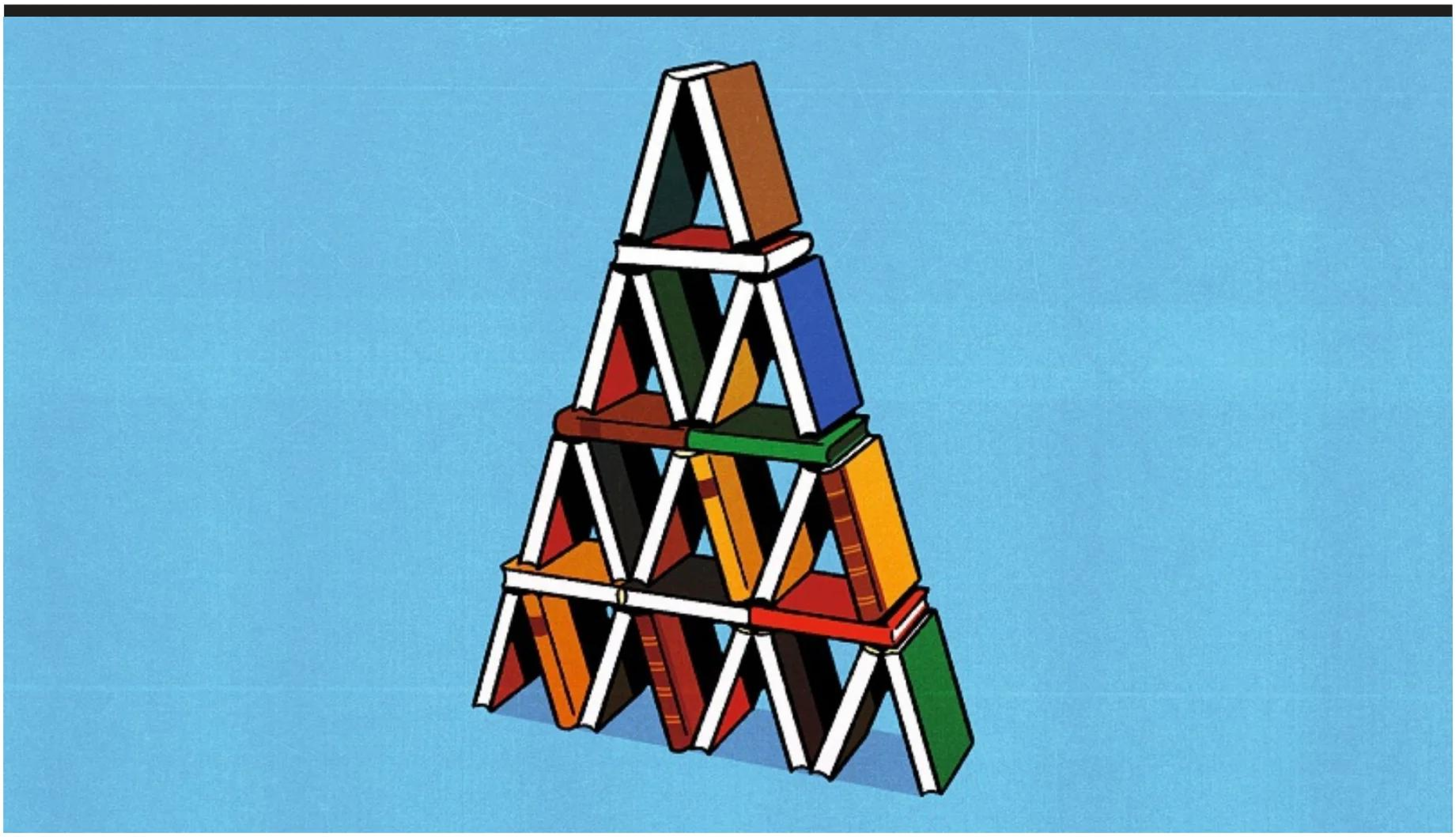
Intellect



Undercover Economist

When science is built on lies

by TIM HARFORD

ILLUSTRATION *by* ALBERTO MIRANDA

In February 1912, noted scientist Arthur Woodward received an intriguing letter from Charles Dawson, a country lawyer with a growing reputation as an amateur geologist. Dawson told Woodward that he had found fossilised fragments of human skull in the flint beds of Piltdown near the south coast of England. The find looked pretty special. It was.

The skull of Piltdown Man, with an apelike jaw and a large cranium, seemed to be a missing link in the evolutionary chain between modern humans and our primate ancestors. It was more than four decades before researchers began to suspect a hoax – and quickly discovered compelling evidence that every single discovery associated with Piltdown had been a fake.

I had long regarded the Piltdown fake as a unique product of the Edwardian age. Now I am not so sure. Some of the most famous "discoveries" in psychology are also being exposed – sometimes decades after the fact – as distorted, misreported or exaggerated to a disturbing degree. For a while, it seemed that 1950-1975 was a heroic age of psychological research, in which bold – if ethically questionable – findings seared themselves on the public consciousness. There was the Stanford Prison Experiment in 1971, in which student volunteers were invited by the psychologist Philip Zimbardo to act out the roles of prisoners and prison guards. The study swiftly deteriorated into dehumanising abuse, as the guards embraced their role as fascist thugs with too much enthusiasm.

There was the UFO cult who intensified their beliefs at precisely the moment (December 22 1954, just after midnight) that their prophecy of the end of the world failed to materialise: all witnessed by undercover researchers.

There was the "Robber's Cave experiment", also in 1954, in which the psychologist Muzafer Sherif organised a summer camp at Robbers Cave State Park, Oklahoma, for 11-year-old boys. He and his associates then took notes as the camp descended into a hellish real-life version of *Lord of the Flies*.

What a collection of daring, epic research discoveries. Alas, they were more than merely daring: they were downright misleading. Begin with the Stanford Prison Experiment – a misnomer from the start, since there was no experimental control. Thanks to some detective work by Thibault Le Texier, a historian, it seems clear that the experiment's mastermind, Zimbardo, heavily coached the "guards" to dehumanise and brutalise the "prisoners". The prison simulation has traditionally been described as a surprising and spontaneous eruption of brutality. Le Texier sets out a strong case that the brutality was orchestrated by the experimenters from the start.

> The rewards for discovering are large. The rewards for debunking are small if not non-existent

There is a similar story to be told about the Robbers Cave study. The superficial telling of this tale is that a group of boys were recruited to participate in a summer camp. Sherif and his collaborators – playing the role of camp counsellors – split the boys into two groups (the "Eagles" and the "Rattlers") and organised baseball and tug-of-war contests with prizes. Sherif correctly predicted that the competition for resources between the groups would lead to bitter rivalry and fighting, and that the groups could then be reconciled by the presence of an external threat: vandalism to the camp's water supply.

As with Zimbardo, there were always questions over the ethics of this study – some of the boys found the experience distressing, and none of them was told that they had been the subjects of an experiment.

BUT MORE RECENT RESEARCH RAISES scientific questions, too. Historian Gina Perry, in her book *The Lost Boys* (2018), points out that the experimenters had to go to some lengths to engineer the tribal rivalry they had predicted, and that the note-taking observers often disagreed about what they were seeing. Those who had worked with Sherif on his theories found evidence to support them, while more independent observers would often describe very different dynamics. Strangest of all, Sherif had run another study the year before, in which the boys stubbornly refused to hate each other, and concluded – correctly – that the camp staff kept trying to stir up trouble. That study was buried in the archives, barely mentioned. "It was as if Sherif wanted to forget it," writes Perry.

The next shoe to drop? *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), the classic account of the UFO cult, was written by more giants of 20th century psychology: Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken and Stanley Schachter. Festinger and his colleagues had infiltrated the UFO cult and described behaviour in line with Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance: when the cult's apocalyptic predictions did not emerge, the core members of the group clung even more firmly to their beliefs and began to evangelise about them at the very moment they seemed to have been disproved.

In work published late last year, researcher Thomas Kelly shreds this story of its credibility. Kelly had access to unsealed archival material, which demonstrated that the authors had misreported many of the events, distorting them to fit Festinger's theory. They also interfered with the psychological processes they were purporting to observe, manipulating cult members through their conversations and even fabricating psychic messages. "Every major claim of the book is false," writes Kelly, "and the researchers' notes leave no option but to conclude the misrepresentations were intentional."

Most shocking of all to fans of elegant writing – if not to scientists – has been the recent revelation by Rachel Aviv in The New Yorker that the neurologist Oliver Sacks, author of beloved books such as *Awakenings* (1973), had exaggerated and distorted the cases he wrote about and was wracked with guilt about the fabrications.

In a letter to his brother, Sacks described *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985) as "fairy tales" and "half-report, half-imagined, half-science, half-fable". Were millions of readers told they were paying for fairy tales? They were not.

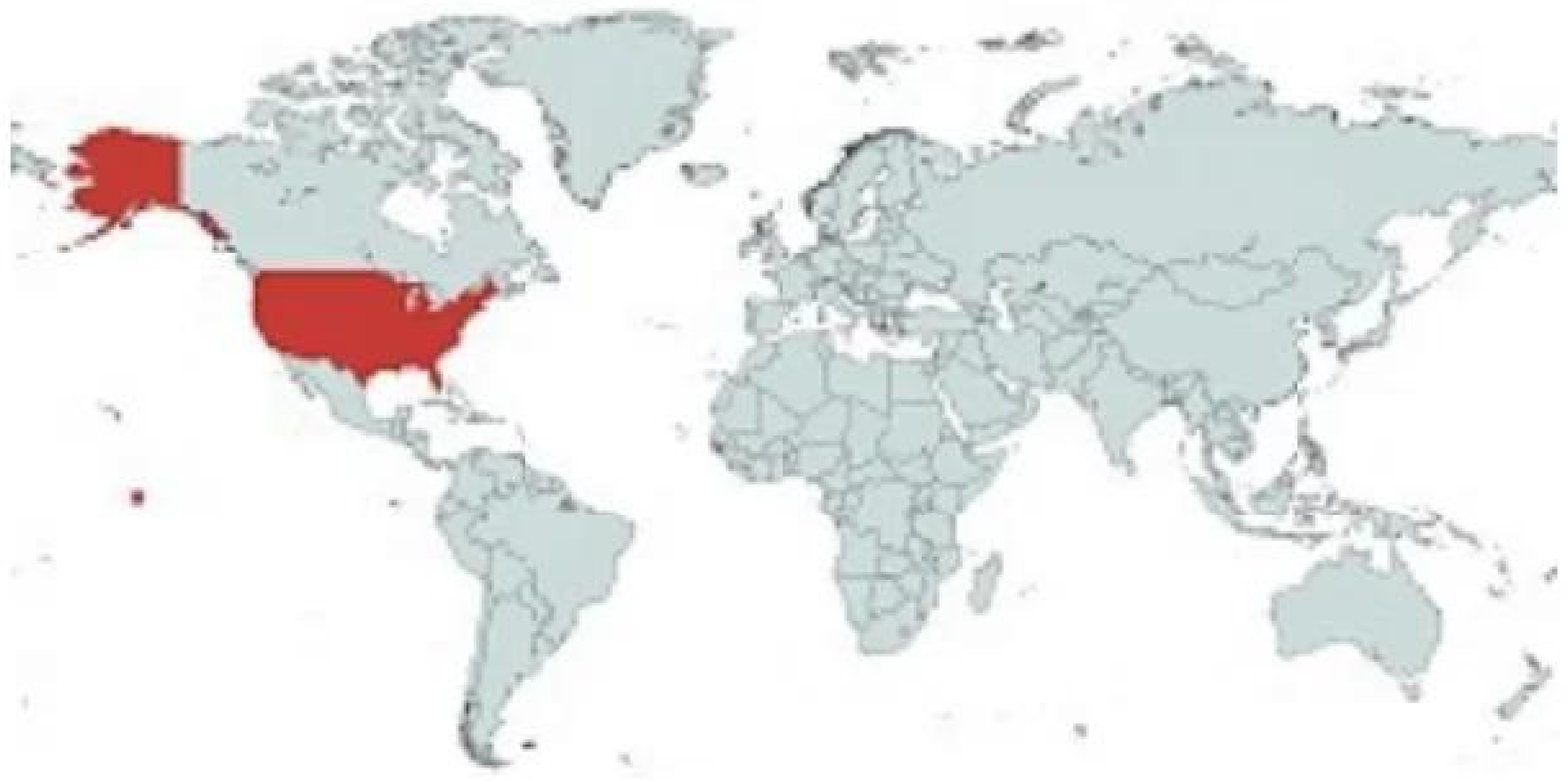
Are there any lessons to be drawn from such a catalogue of distortion and exaggeration? There's the old warning against stories that are too good to be true, and it applies here. But there's also a structural problem. The rewards to "discovering" a spectacular scientific finding are large; the rewards to debunking frauds or deflating exaggerated claims are small if not non-existent. If these are the rules of the game, we should not be surprised at the way the game is played. FT

DEPARTMENTS

REPORTS *from* LESSER-KNOWN
FT BUREAUX

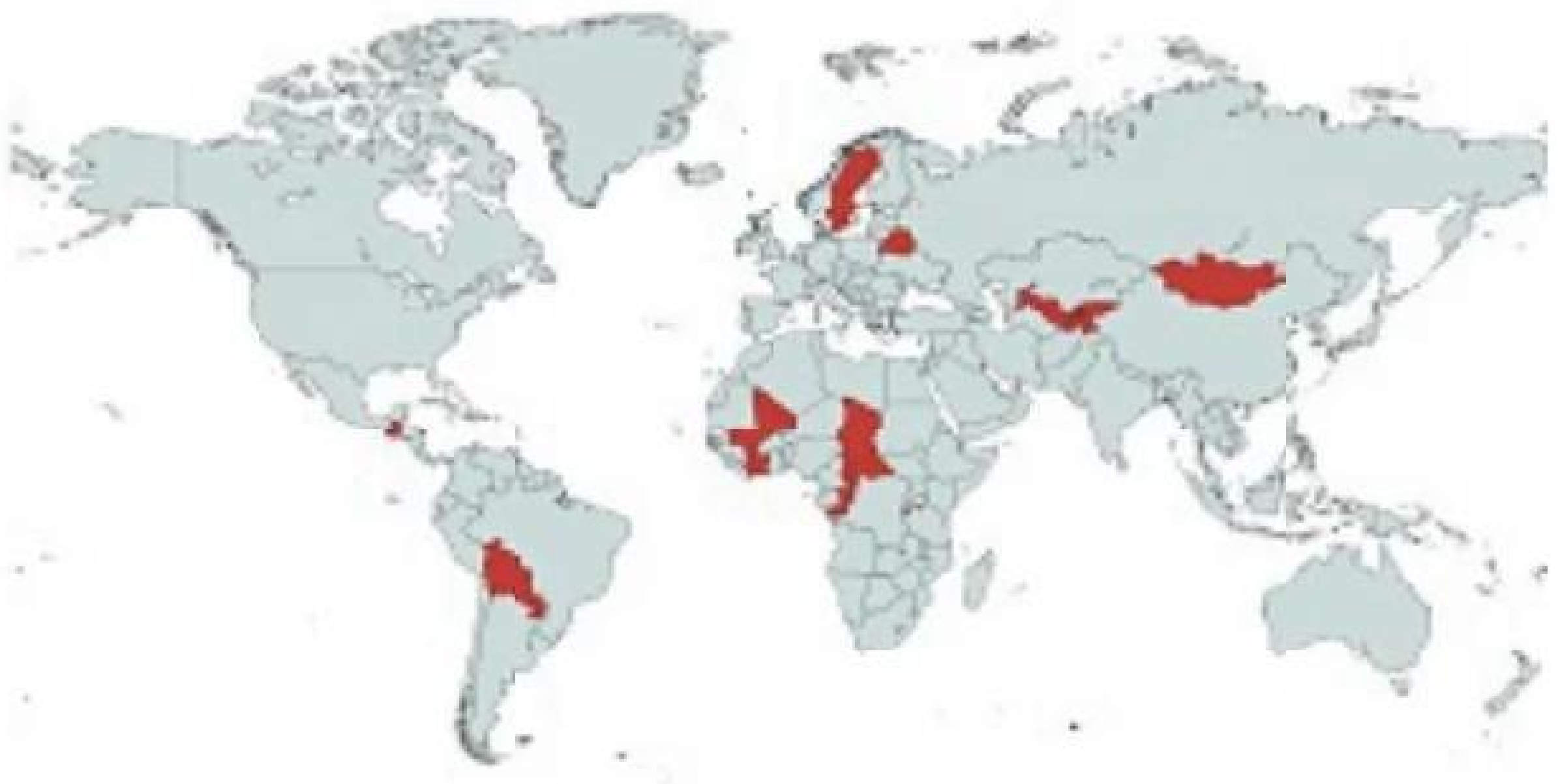
AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Countries that have lost wars against Vietnamese rice farmers



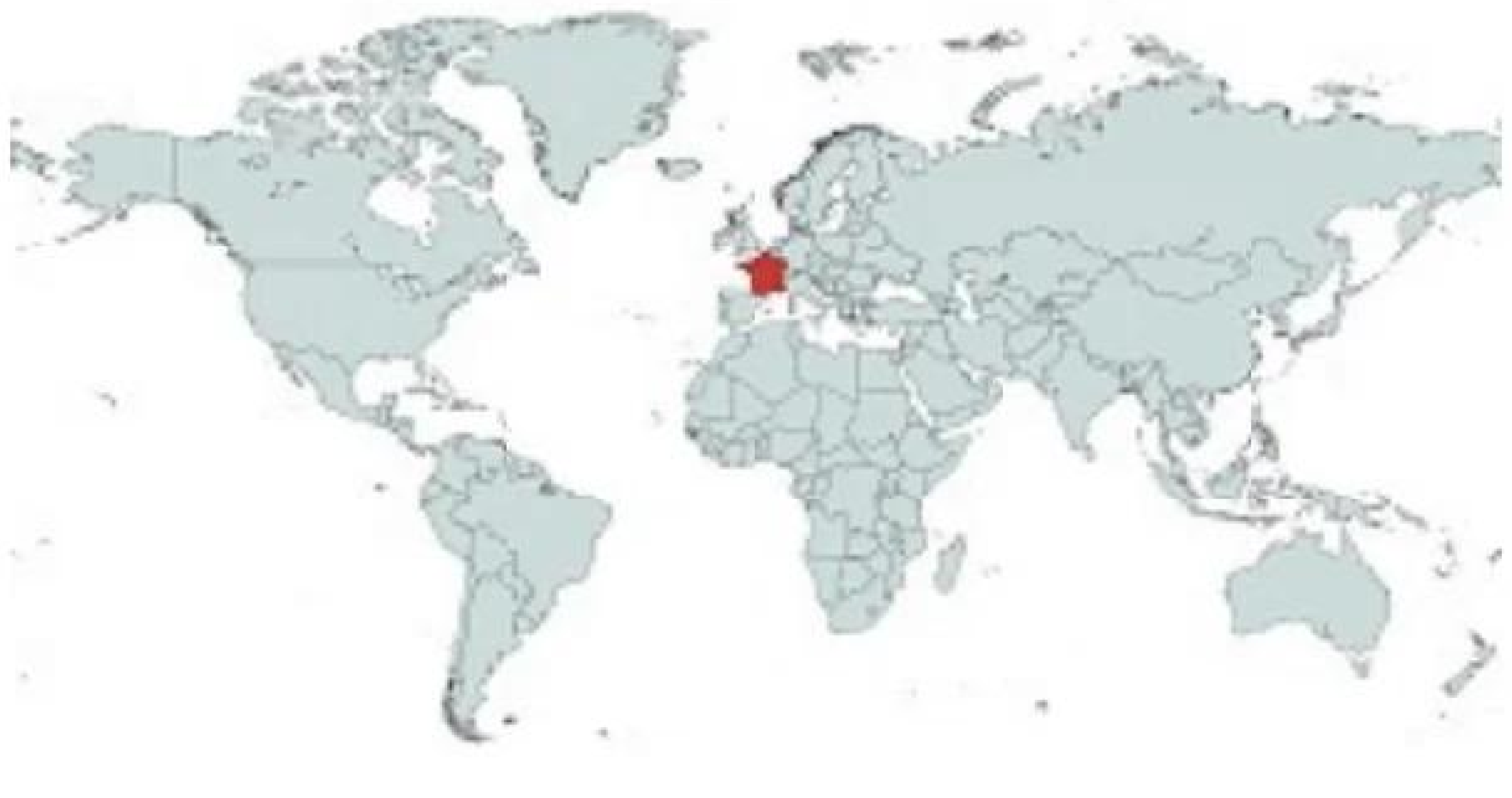
BRITISH EXCEPTIONALISM

Countries that have never been invaded by Britain



FRENCH EXCEPTIONALISM

Countries in which Jerry Lewis is considered a comedic genius



LAST WEEK'S THEME: LANGUAGE

THE DIFFERENCE IS

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GALLERY

MIMI MOLLICA

by JOSH LUSTIG

The Covid pandemic forced many photographers to turn inwards. With movement restricted, some took the opportunity to trawl their archives or make work close to home. London-based Mimi Mollica turned to the heavens. From his balcony overlooking the Regent's Canal, Mollica set up a telescope and began photographing the Moon and the City of London. "At night, the City flares up in a spectacle of steel, glass and human engineering," he tells me.

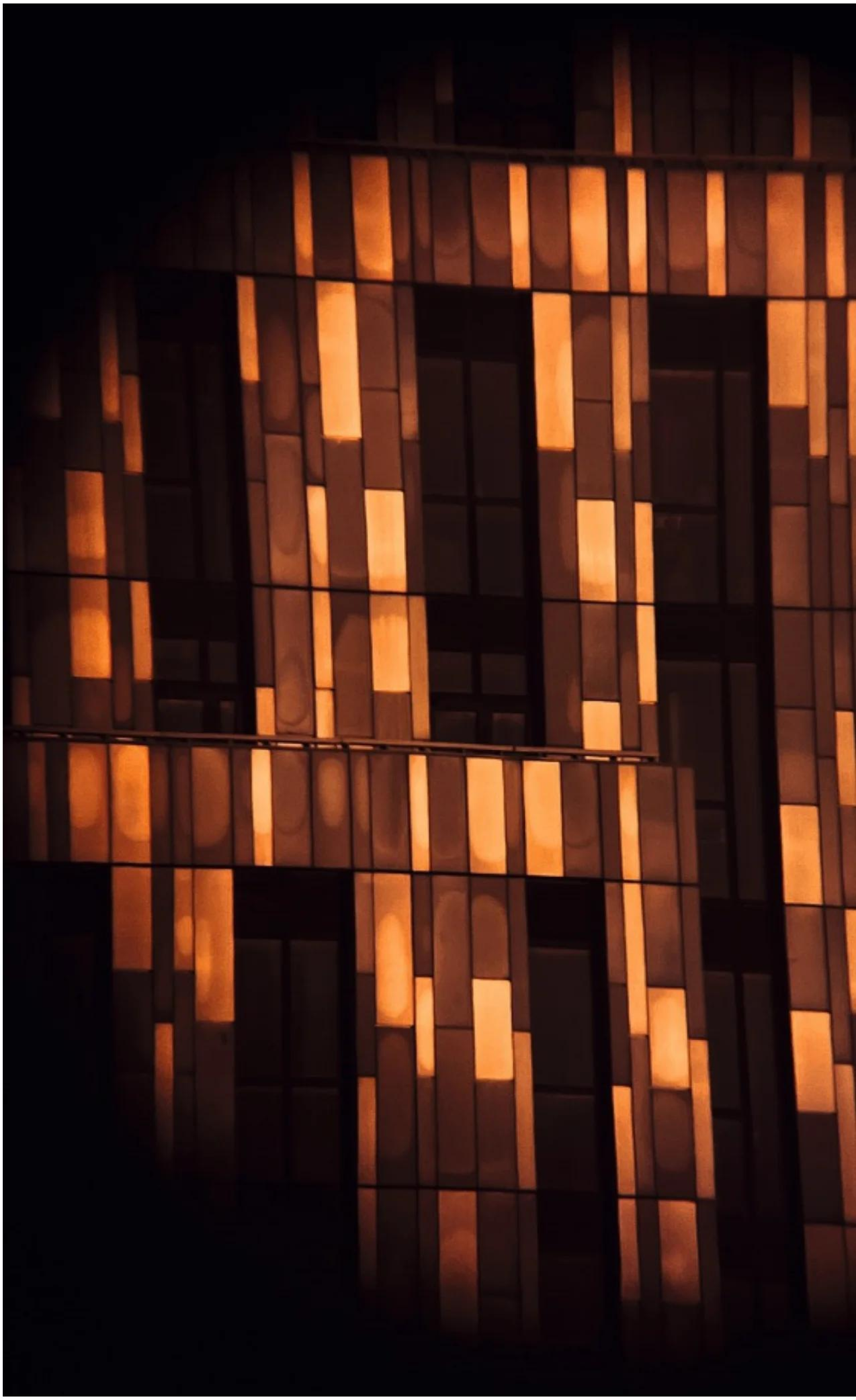
With this spectacle juxtaposed against the silent, celestial ambivalence of the Moon, Mollica has created a book of photographs that feels both unsettling and like an act of resistance. Pointing his camera into the Square Mile, with its abundance of CCTV cameras, the sense of surveillance is unrelenting, compounded by vignettes from the telescope and the slightly broken image quality of the photographs, which were made on an iPhone.

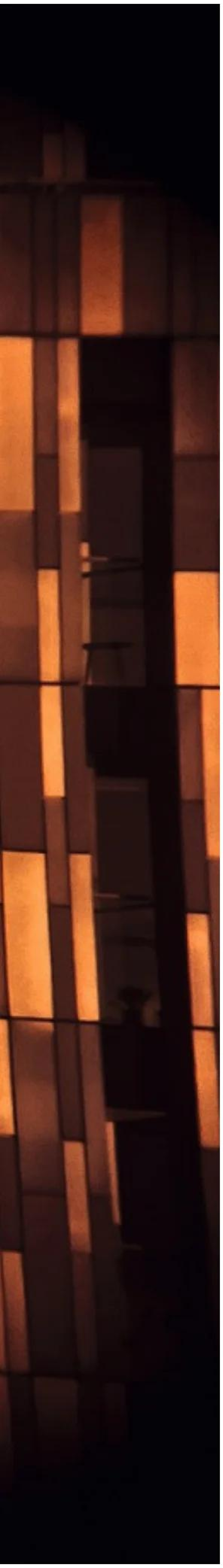
The effect is cinematic, noirish. Echoes of *Blade Runner* and *Metropolis*, of *Rear Window* and *Un Chien Andalou*. There's a sense that our natural satellite has taken on the role of something unnatural. An all-seeing eye sitting in cold judgment. Or perhaps in pity.

In Mollica's book, the City is a place where the forces exerted lie beyond most of our control. Scratching and building, lifting and hauling, scaffolds and cranes are everywhere in the pictures, as objects that bring these great glass and steel skyscrapers into existence. Human faces sit in between these images, closely cropped and abstracted. "The anonymous, blurred faces of ordinary people who are the gears of an exploitative system," says Mollica.

One of his inspirations for the project was Luigi Pirandello's 1907 short story "Ciàula Discovers the Moon", where the title character – a sulphur miner in Sicily – is comforted by the light of the Moon. He fears natural darkness, but is perfectly comfortable in the artificially illuminated darkness of the mine. Perhaps the Moon also offers solace to those who live in a city, just like Ciàula. A reminder of our place in the universe. An antidote to the grinding gears of London's relentless thirst for growth. FT

"Moon City" is published by Dewi Lewis, dewilewis.com



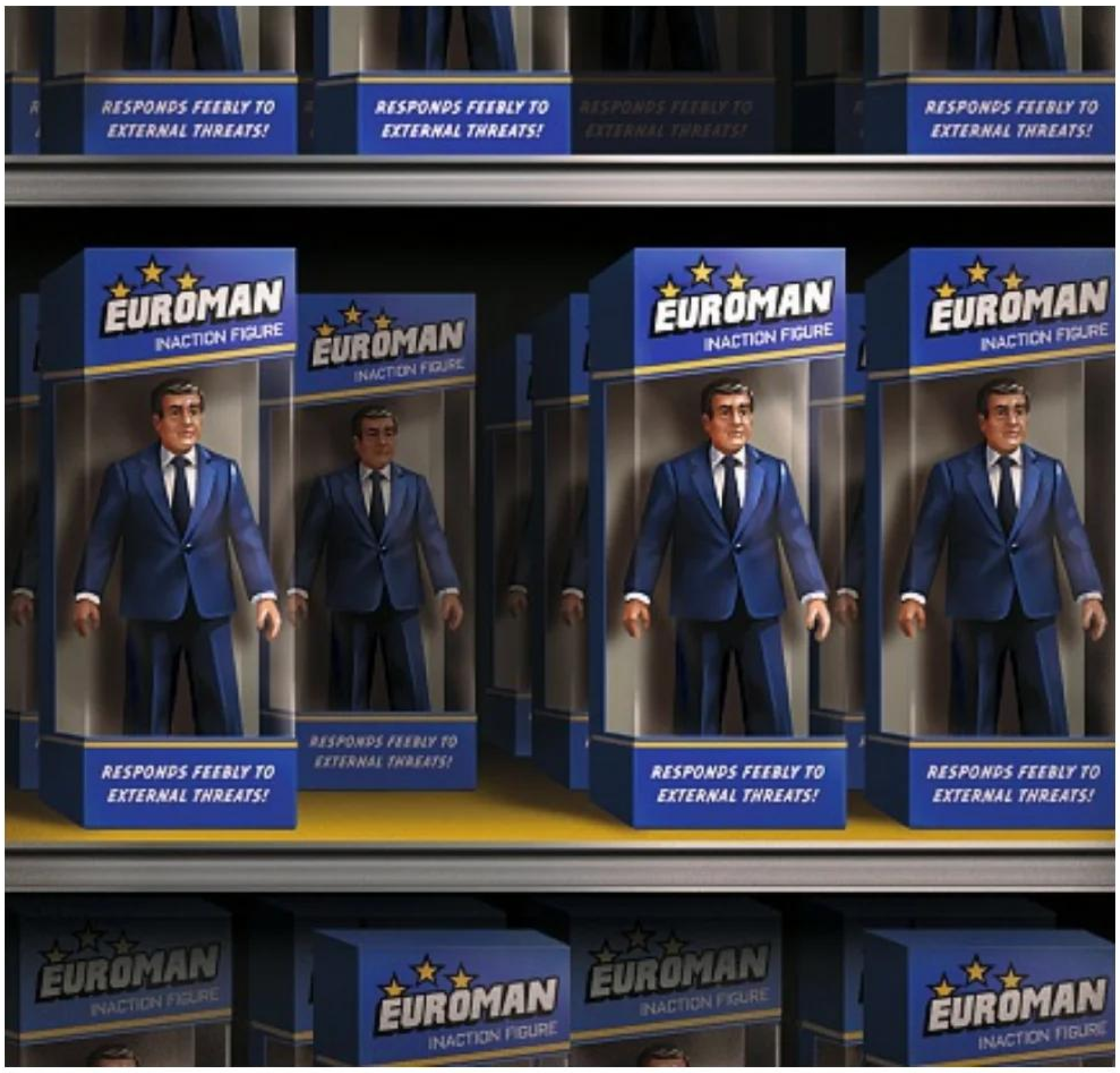


World View

The impotence of Europe's governing elite

by SIMON KUPER

ILLUSTRATION *by* HARRY HAYSOM


EUROMAN
INACTION FIGURE
RESPONDS FEEBLY TO EXTERNAL THREATS!

The uniform of Europe's governing elite – the politicians, senior civil servants, think-tankers and advisers who run governments from London to Brussels to Moldova – is the dark-blue suit.

Go to one of the tribe's conferences and you'll see hordes of white men, aged 45 to 60, in the blue kit. For a male tribe member to wear anything else would be a revolutionary breach, and Europe's governing elite doesn't do revolutionary breaches. That is part of its problem.

Europe is under unprecedented pressure from Russia, China, climate change, AI and Donald Trump (who the tribe has finally, quietly, accepted is an enemy). This tribe hopes to ward off multiple catastrophes at once by following its trusted method: wait until adversaries act, then respond feebly. To understand its ineffectiveness requires understanding the well-meaning people who staff it.

This tribe defines itself by education – typically degrees in law, economics or political science, though many Brits studied humanities and most of the French can do maths. All have been rigorously trained to think inside the box. Some tribe members did stints at US universities, where they practised the excellent English that's become a membership requirement and fell for a country that's now outside their circle of trust.

Though they remain proud of their membership, their sense of personal achievement has been dimmed by the tribe's failures since 2008. Their education left out things that now turn out to matter. They don't know much about tech. Hardly any have even a day's military experience. More of them speak Italian as a foreign language than Mandarin, and their exposure to China is so limited that any member returning from a week there gets treated as Marco Polo. Because few Asian or American elite members can be bothered to meet them, the tribe exchanges information mostly with itself.

Almost by definition, tribe members live in capital cities, seldom encountering other classes. Much of what they know about young people comes from observing their equally atypical children. They support Europe's fast-vanishing centre-left or centre-right parties and form almost the last European demographic in which hardly anyone votes far-right. I only once saw a far-right speaker at a tribe gathering: an adviser to France's Rassemblement National party, who was politely received, but spoke halting English with less erudition than everyone else. I sensed that he craved, above all, his audience's approval.

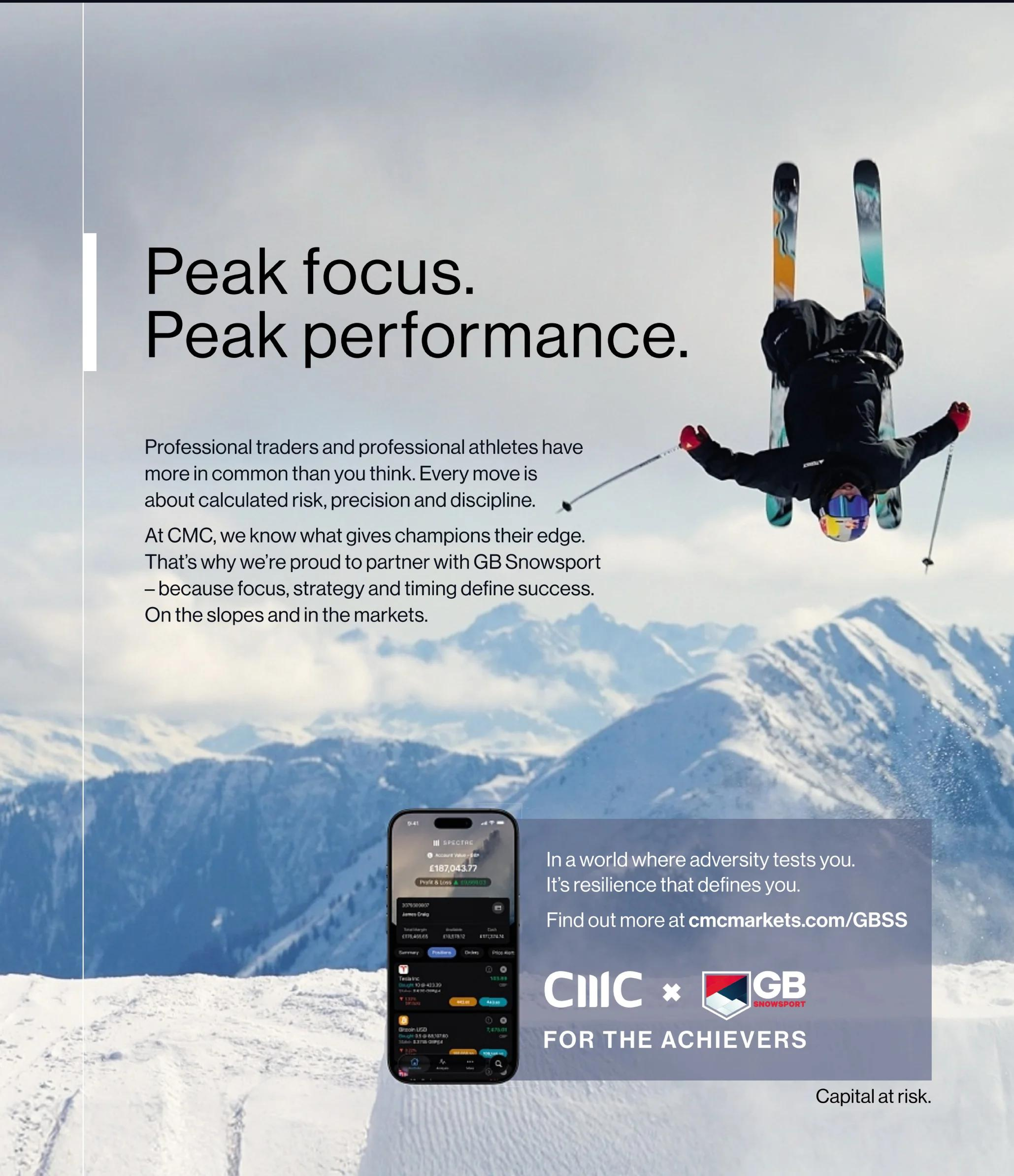
> Tribe members have landed in a jungle armed only with suits and diplomas

Tribe members are serious, hardworking people (except during the summer holiday) who genuinely believe the liberal principles they grew up with. Still, they aren't kidding themselves: they know they are losing. Their conferences are in glorious European locations with nice food, and members draw comfort from each other's company, but the discussions are sombre, sometimes terrifying. Nothing in their lengthy CVs prepared them for today's world. They have landed in a jungle equipped only with suits and diplomas.

They know they need to jump from plodding managerialism to radical action – for instance, by drastically raising aid to Ukraine. They'd like to confront Trump, defend democracy, make the green transition, etc. But they are afraid of their countries' electorates, who distrust them and won't make any sacrifice for these goals. The governing elite's narratives are boring, whereas the far-right offers conspiracy theories and scapegoats.

This elite lacks the cut-throat instincts of its adversaries. It gave in to Trump on tariffs partly for fear he would abandon Europe's defence, but Europeans still don't link issues like he does. Nor do they retaliate against Russian cyber attacks, or ban Germany's far-right AfD party, which is accused of spying for Vladimir Putin, or try to create European social media. But one thing the tribe has done is reduce Europe's military aid to Ukraine.

Any elite has one ultimate aim: to remain the elite. For the blue suits, the existential threat isn't an invasion by Trump or Putin. It's a domestic far-right takeover of their governments, which could upset their nice lives, conference jaunts and pension pots. One member of the French elite told me that as a teenager he often wondered what he would have done if he'd been a civil servant when the Vichy regime took power. In the event, he remarked, practically all French civil servants stayed in their seats and said nothing. FT



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FOR THE ACHIEVERS

Capital at risk.

Observatory

Colin Davidson

The artist who paints presidents, poets and pop stars.

By *Jude Webber*

PORTRAIT *by ELLIUS GRACE*

In his kitchen, Colin Davidson makes a pot of tea under the watchful gaze of Ed Sheeran. I follow him through the door into his studio, up the stairs, past Queen Elizabeth II, and sit down next to Bono. As I take my place by Davidson's easel, I wonder whether, after producing more than 350 portraits in the past 16 years, the Northern Irish artist scours every face he meets with forensic scrutiny.

I need not have worried. Sitting in the 150-year-old converted stable block that houses his studio at his home in Bangor, near Belfast, I don't feel his stare boring into me. In fact, at some of my questions, he takes off his glasses and screws his eyes shut, searching for the right reply. He speaks slowly, thoughtfully. In his casual uniform of dungarees, corduroy waistcoat and clogs, Davidson, 57, seems at times uncomfortable at being on the receiving end of the attention, rather than doling it out – something he appreciates can feel, for a sitter, "incredibly unnerving at the start". He has painted politicians, cultural greats and celebrities, including Bill Clinton, Sir Kenneth Branagh, Angela Merkel, Seamus Heaney and Edna O'Brien. "Making a painting of a human face or head is difficult enough," he says, "but making a painting of a human head that has to look like the person is infinitely more complex. You can ruin a painting by trying to get the likeness right, and you can ruin a likeness by trying to get the painting right."

For Davidson, the job of a portraitist is to "quarry" beneath the facade someone presents to the world, rather than to render a photographic likeness in oils. "What's really important to me is that I'm after the truth," he says. "I don't want to in any way invest the painting with a self-indulgent sense of who *I* think that person is. There has to be an honesty to it." Which is how he came to capture Brad Pitt just after the exhausted actor had got off a transatlantic flight, looking nothing like a Hollywood star. Or the former US president looking uncharacteristically uncertain.

Davidson is discreet enough never to reveal the detail of what he and his subjects discuss as he works. It's a process that typically begins with him photographing them, sometimes in their homes, sometimes at his studio, and filling his sketchbook with pen studies that he'll call on back in the studio. The late Queen, whom he painted in 2016, started to relax about 30 minutes into her sitting at Buckingham Palace, beginning to reveal a great-grandmother, talking about her 90th birthday. "Those are the bits where she's letting me in to glimpse somebody other than that face we see on £20 notes," he says. The resulting portrait is neither regal, nor especially flattering. "People know that I will never be unkind, but I will never use an airbrush. I will paint what I see, and paint what I feel."

As a child growing up in south Belfast, he had a pronounced stammer and low self-confidence until he discovered a talent for drawing. It offered him a way to express himself, and a new sense of self-belief. He first made it as a graphic designer, then as a successful artist, working both to commission and simply to "challenge" himself (I note the sleek dark green Porsche parked outside, as I pull up in my grubby 14-year-old Golf). Yet I spot a shadow of defensiveness in him. He is gracious when I ask about his stammer, which occasionally flickers still, and candid about how his self-worth is tied up in being an artist, even as he maintains he does not particularly seek the approval of art critics, or belong to any scene. He has a show on in Dublin and a new book, based on conversations with his friend, the BBC journalist Mark Carruthers. And yet he hesitates. "I wonder if I'm still on that road of [art] positively needing to define me," he muses. "Without it, the inner child in me doesn't really have a huge amount of confidence in what I have to offer, who I am." When I ask him what it is that he would like to hide from people's quarrying eyes, he ducks. "I might not answer that."

DAVIDSON'S MOST HIGH-PROFILE SHOW featured no celebrities at all: *Silent Testimony* (2014-15) exhibited in 2024-25 at London's National Portrait Gallery after being shown in Paris and New York. In it, he used his habitual 127cm by 117cm canvases to depict 18 ordinary people who suffered devastating loss during the Troubles. His aim was to "look at the familiar in a new way". The people he painted – haunted, resilient, dignified – are an everyman and everywoman in a region where the legacy of the conflict still overshadows three decades of peace. "Really, all I was trying to do at the start was say, look, let's just stop and think that, amongst us, these people exist," he says. "And that, as a society, as we talk about moving on, actually there are thousands of people that can't."

Raised in a "very religious Christian Protestant home" – although now he wouldn't describe himself even as a Protestant – he has painted people of all beliefs. He considers his *Silent Testimony* paintings among his most meaningful and personal work. Since finishing the project, he has become a patron at the Wave Trauma Centre, which supports victims of the Troubles. Wave helped him identify the people he would paint in *Silent Testimony*.

Many of the subjects of his other portraits were the result of "serendipitous" encounters. His first large portrait came about after bumping into the friend of a friend whom he had known for years, the musician Duke Special. Special introduced him to the Irish singer-songwriter Glen Hansard. Hansard then featured Davidson's portrait of him on the cover of one of his albums. Brad Pitt saw it, as well as some of Davidson's other work at the Royal Academy in London, and asked him to give him painting lessons (he did, and also painted Pitt's portrait twice). Another personal introduction led Davidson to paint former Dire Straits frontman Mark Knopfler. Six degrees of separation is usually too much in a small place like Northern Ireland, but it continues: Olympic gold medallist pentathlete Lady Mary Peters came to view Davidson's portrait of her with one of her oldest friends, who turned out to be Ed Sheeran's granny, and this led to Davidson painting the singer's portrait.

Through his friend Carruthers, then chair of Belfast's Lyric Theatre, Davidson began painting actors. That association led to him painting the Queen, who in 2012 famously shook hands with the late former IRA commander and deputy first minister Martin McGuinness, whom Davidson also painted.

Despite all this, he resists being pigeonholed as a portraitist. One of his most enduring subjects is Belfast, lovingly rendered in detailed cityscapes. His current exhibition in Dublin is of his *Stranger* series, which he calls "paintings that you can walk around". The two-metre-tall faceless figures, gathered in his studio when I visit, are 3D-printed from maquettes crafted from layers of thickened oil paint, which Davidson regards as "another blank canvas which I then attack with acrylic paint".

We've been sitting in the studio for two hours under the steadfast gaze of Bono, whose 2021 portrait (he has painted the singer several times) rests on the easel. "I neither want, nor expect, nor need everybody to like my work," Davidson says. "Every blob of paint I put on the canvas is for me. I do not have a hint of 'what is anybody going to think of this?' as I'm doing it… It's ultimately about me, a reflection of me. It's a self-portrait."

Jude Webber is the FT's Ireland correspondent. "Colin Davidson: Twelve Paintings – Conversations with Mark Carruthers" is published by Merrion Press. "Stranger" is at the Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts, Dublin, until January 25

Rewatch

The Wire

Chaos and amorality in the pre-Trump era.

By *Kabir Chibber*

Last year, trying to avoid the misery of our current moment (the wars, the slop, the uninspiring leadership) and with nothing but sequels and reboots by way of a cultural response, I began rewatching all five seasons of noughties HBO show *The Wire*.

Ostensibly a police procedural, *The Wire* follows a group of weary cops in an unwanted Major Crimes Unit trying to bring down Baltimore's drug crews. But from the start, the underlying ambitions of its creators, former cop Ed Burns and former journalist David Simon, were clear. "The grand theme here is nothing less than a national existentialism," Simon wrote in a leaked pitch to HBO from 2000. He promised that "the reward for the viewer – who has been lured all this way by a well constructed police show... is something that Euripides or O'Neill might recognise: an America, at every level at war with itself." And it wasn't hyperbole. *The Wire* was lauded as the best TV show of all time; two decades later it still is by many critics.

The show ended in March 2008, before the financial crisis, as the campaign of a young presidential hopeful from Chicago, Barack Obama, was taking flight. Obama called *The Wire* his favourite show and the gay stickup artist Omar Little its best character. I admit that in rewatching it I was ostriching. I remembered *The Wire* as the product of a dysfunctional but ultimately moral time. I wanted to retreat into that past, to escape the chaos of Donald Trump's America, if only for an hour at a time.

Today's horrors are of a different magnitude, yet, what I found as I watched was a pre-Trump world that didn't seem so glorious. Instead, I saw a portrait of a major city in the most powerful country on earth, failing miserably. Institutions in decline, self-serving elites who fail to deliver for the voters they are supposed to represent. A world of endless compromise, of criminals debating the differences between "norms" and "rules". There were the white dockworkers, deindustrialised and forgotten, who would soon become the Maga base. In late August, days after Trump sent the National Guard into Washington, I watched an episode where one officer asks, "You think that if 300 white people were killed in this city every year, they wouldn't send the 82nd Airborne?" Of course, they would, I thought. They were already talking about it.

Already, *The Wire*'s creators understood what was happening to the country. They were not blind to the problems to which Trump would announce himself as the solution. In that regard, the show serves as a record of all that was already rotten.

The Wire asked us, what happens to a society where you can break the rules and get away with it? The real world gave us the answer. The best show to understand the Trump era turns out to be the best show of the pre-Trump era.

IN PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS SCENE FROM an early episode, several small-time dealers are learning to play chess. "So how do you get to be the king?" one asks. "It ain't like that," comes the reply. "See, the king stay the king, all right? Everything stay who he is, except for the pawns." *The Wire* is about how things should be, and how they are, about who can rise and who deserves it.

Lately, when I think of the current US president and contemplate his attacks on societal norms, I find myself thinking about "the Sunday truce". The Baltimore dealers of drugs whose colourful nicknames include "WMD", "Bin Laden" and "Pandemic" observe one day of mutual nonviolence a week: Sunday. Omar has been robbing the stash spots of kingpin Avon Barksdale's crew without compunction on the other six days, year after year. When he is spotted taking his grandmother to church on a Sunday, permission is given by Avon's cerebral lieutenant, Stringer Bell, to go after him. Bullets fly. The old lady's capacious hat, her "crown", is shot off her head.

MICHAEL KENNETH WILLIAMS AS OMAR LITTLE; DOMINIC WEST AS JIMMY MCNULTY; IDRIS ELBA AS STRINGER BELL; AND AIDAN GILLEN AS MAYOR TOMMY CARCETTI

Omar can't believe it ("No shame!") and neither can Avon, once he finds out. "The Sunday truce has been around as long as the game itself, man," Avon admonishes Stringer. "You can do some shit… but just never on no Sunday." How do you deal with someone who revels in breaking the rules, the show asks. What is a norm, anyway?

Simon and Burns did not predict the rise of Trump. But they did create another ruthless upstart who infiltrated the system and then took it over. Marlo Stanfield makes Stringer's regard for norms and rules look positively schoolboyish. The other dealers try to tame him by inviting him into their cartel to share the spoils. Instead, Marlo announces that he's murdered the cartel's leader after learning everything he needed – and there's no need for any more meetings. "And one more thing," Marlo announces as he consolidates control of Baltimore's drug trade. "Price of the brick going up."

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As the show's five seasons progress, we get to look inside a different city institution. There are the career politicians – councilmen, attorneys-general and elected judges, all vying for a slice of the pie. We follow an ex-cop into high school, where he is forced to teach kids the answers to test questions so that their grades will show they learnt something. We see what's left of the local newspaper, whose editors care less about local readers than winning awards. (Simon was once a Baltimore Sun crime reporter.)

In the second season, *The Wire* shifts to the port of Baltimore. Now we see how the drugs come in. Frank Sobotka is the union leader at the port, where fewer and fewer ships dock every year. He looks the other way, not to line his own pockets but to buy his way into political circles to keep the port alive. Here is the much mythologised American white working class, who worked good, honest jobs but found they had little value to society through no fault of their own. Frank and his union are of Polish stock, a distinct kind of white culture, quite separate from that of the police. Sometimes they feel more like the poor Black population. "Black, white, what's the difference, Nat?" Frank tells a colleague. Trump would put it less crudely when he asked Black voters, "What have you got to lose?"

Frank's wayward son, Ziggy, unable to get any shifts on the docks like his old man, unable to sell drugs with any skill, finally snaps. The last time we see him, he's about to go to prison for double murder.

Throughout it all, stalks the shotgun-toting, openly homosexual, hyper-moralist Omar. Obama apparently preferred Omar to Tommy Carcetti, whose arc, becoming the white mayor of a majority-Black city, was then only slightly less unlikely than the ascent of America's first Black president. Once in power, on a platform of change and renewal, Tommy finds himself in thrall to the city's identity groups. In this city, like so many in America, Democrats outnumber Republicans by orders of magnitude. One thing that becomes clear is that voters don't have much to show for their loyalty. Nothing seems to get better. Tommy rides a wave of hope to power. Then he disappoints almost everyone. One of Ziggy's cousins reappears to hurl abuse at a surprised Tommy, who has rezoned around the docks to build luxury condos. Another dockworker is shown homeless. Tommy has no idea who these people are, but we do. Watching Obama kite surfing by Richard Branson's private Caribbean island days after Trump's first inauguration I'd felt a similar pang of outrage.

> The best show to understand the Trump era turns out to be the best show of the pre-Trump era

THE SHOW, DRIPPING IN THE CYNICISM BORN of a disappointed idealism, perhaps had the misfortune to end in 2008. Its critiques never had the chance to marinate as Obama's election allowed liberal followers to feel they'd begun addressing the problems – that everything was now moving in the right direction. But beneath the surface, the resentments were only getting worse. We're now living with the aftershocks of Tommy Carcetti's America, of a disappointment that was building long before Obama.

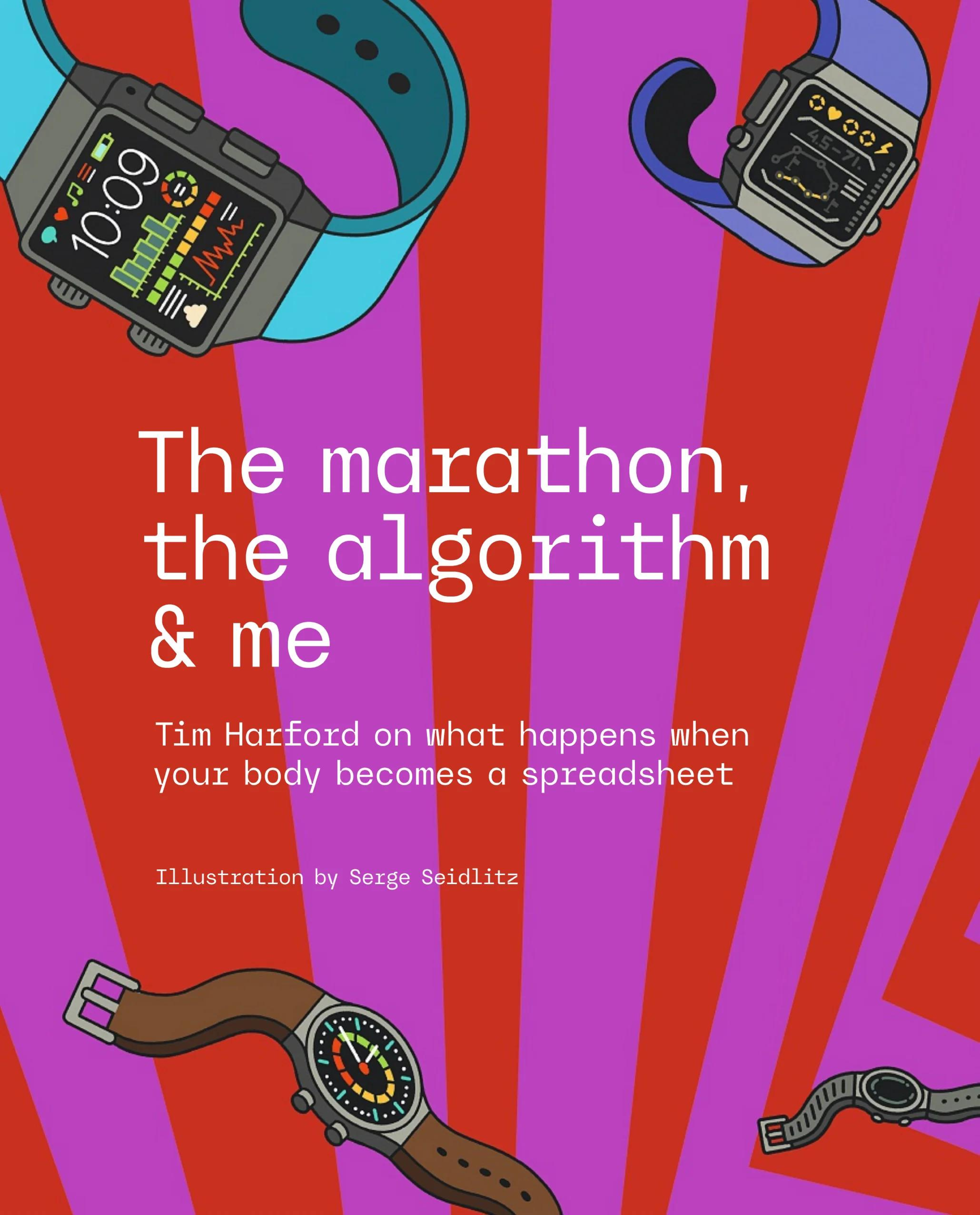
For all its critical acclaim, *The Wire* isn't mentioned as much any more in popular culture. You don't see it in the reaction gifs on social media. Part of that, I think, is because the people who loved the show when it came out belong to those institutions that have been under sustained attack for the past decade. The journalists, the politicians, the educators. All those professions have lost some of their stature. *The Wire* was the favourite show of a particularly 20th-century incarnation of the cultural elite, that could help keep a show on the air in a way which is no longer possible in the era of the all-seeing algorithm.

We might have preserved a better connection from that time to our own if Simon and Burns had managed to make what I think of as the lost season of *The Wire*, one they spoke about openly. It would have focused on the growing Hispanic population of Baltimore. Immigration, and who belongs where, is the issue of our time. "I would have loved to have done that, but none of us knew Spanish and none of us had done any research on it," Simon said. "It would have taken us a little time, as it always did." The show is poorer without it.

As this issue was going to press, the American public was watching the fallout from the fatal shooting of a Minneapolis woman by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent. It is an obvious escalation of Trump's strong-arm tactics. But rewatching *The Wire* reminded me that the world before him was not all that pretty, either.

Simon and Burns had dared to question that America. And they got their answer. *The Wire* is to American liberalism what Marcel Ophuls's two-part 1969 documentary *The Sorrow and The Pity* was to the Nazi occupation of France. Sixty episodes later, I felt I understood one of the street-corner soldiers when he says: "This game is rigged, man. We like them little bitches on the chessboard." **FT**

LANDMARK MEDIA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



The marathon, the algorithm & me

Tim Harford on what happens when your body becomes a spreadsheet

Illustration by Serge Seidlitz

Twenty-five centuries ago, after the Greeks shattered the Persian army at Marathon, brave Pheidippides ran 26 miles to Athens with the news. Robert Browning's poem tells the tale:

"Rejoice, we conquer!" Like wine thro' clay
Joy in his blood bursting his heart, he died – the bliss!

With the death of Pheidippides began the legend of the marathon, a feat of running so arduous that the very attempt could kill you. I plan to run my first marathon in April in London, hoping to avoid his blissful fate. After all, I have an ally that he did not. Pheidippides, for all his valour, lacked a sports watch.

I was never a runner; my knees weren't up to it, I'd tell myself. But one thing led to another and, after a couple of years at my local Parkrun, I bought an entry-level running watch, with no aim beyond pacing myself evenly. I didn't realise that I was plugging my body into the exercise yard of the digital panopticon, with the watch's app estimating everything from my heart-rate to my step count, and hazarding a guess at my body's capacity to use oxygen, not to mention my "fitness age". I had never dreamt such a small box of tricks could provide so many numbers, all claiming in some way to – and here I quote the watch manufacturer, Garmin – "support your efforts to improve and maintain your health".

There is no denying the technological cleverness here. My watch uses a network of 24 satellites, time signals to within three billionths of a second and calculations adjusting for the irregular shape of the planet in order to pinpoint my location to within 5m. It adds an accelerometer, a device that detects changes in speed or direction using interleaved combs of conductive material etched on silicon that flex and touch as my wrist moves. A strip of flashing green lights on the underbelly of my watch monitors my heart rate by detecting how much light bounces off my wrist rather than being absorbed by the red blood swelling and shrinking my tiny capillaries.

It is all something of a miracle, but more interesting still is the panoply of behavioural nudges, everything from inviting me to share my runs on social networks to tracking my "streaks" of exercise. Last year, I began training for a 10k race, then a half-marathon (more than 21km), using the free coaching software bundled with my watch.

Over 12 weeks of training, my virtual coach would send me off on several runs a week, gradually sharpening the pace and increasing the distance, mixing things up with easier runs or fierce sprint intervals. From time to time, I'd get a short article or a canned video message and, after every run, an upbeat verdict: "Great job!" or "Room to grow." A coloured dial, purportedly indicating my coach's confidence, but actually the output of some unknown algorithm, told me how likely I was to achieve my goal on race day.

Without a doubt this coaching programme worked; it prompted me to exercise regularly, and I became faster and fitter. But the longer I used it, the more questions arose in my mind.

There is something about the fitness watch that feels unnervingly familiar after two decades of smartphones and social media. An amazing technology flipping from unimaginable to indispensable almost overnight; the endless tracking, nudging, sharing; the datafication of something that previously had eluded measurement; and a sense of mystery about where all this data is going and how it is being used. On top of all that is something new and visceral: a device worn on my skin, measuring blood, breath, speed and sleep.

Is the fitness watch really to be trusted with my fitness? And can it teach me a lesson about the way so many parts of my life have been transformed into numbers, rewards and targets?

00:00:01

Automated fitness tracking began before I was born. In the 1960s, worried that their Japanese compatriots were becoming sedentary, a doctor named Iwao Ohya and an engineer named Jiro Kato developed a simple step-counter. They called it the *manpokei* or "10,000 step-meter". There are various origin stories for the figure of 10,000 and all of them acknowledge that there is no scientific logic for the threshold. That didn't stop the idea catching on in a big way in the 21st century, when smartphones and fitness trackers began to number our steps and tut disappointedly whenever we missed their arbitrary target.

These tuts make a difference: Katy Milkman, a professor at the Wharton School and author of *How To Change*, showed me step-tracking data from an unpublished study. Her study subjects walked a variety of distances, but the data displayed a huge spike just beyond 10,000 daily steps, evidence of the powerful urge to satisfy the fitness tracker's meaningless target.

Still, motivation is motivation. "There is a widespread perception that fitness trackers don't work, which is incorrect," says Carol Maher, a professor of population and digital health at the University of South Australia, who has conducted many studies into the effects of fitness tracking. "When you put all the evidence together, it's very clear that they do help people walk more and take more steps. It's a modest change but even modest changes are very beneficial."

Maher and a team of researchers conducted a wide-ranging review of different studies of fitness trackers, covering 164,000 participants. They found all the effects that one might hope for: people tend to be more active, walk more, lose fat, lose weight and gain fitness.

This should not be a surprise. Fitness trackers set us simple goals, record our progress and share our achievements with our friends. All of these behaviour nudges are calculated to prod us into action.

Milkman sent me a short reading list of relevant studies, along with a rapid-fire summary. "Reminders change behaviour," she told me. "Bite-sized, short-term goals change behaviour and round-number goals are particularly helpful. Self-monitoring changes behaviour. Symbolic rewards like badges change behaviour. Social accountability, such as sharing your exercise, changes behaviour."

Both Milkman and Maher are convinced that fitness trackers help, and so am I. But help who? And to do what? It's one thing to coax a couch potato to get up and go for a walk; it's another to guide an ageing writer to his first marathon. Yet I had put my watch in charge of reaching this all-encompassing goal.

00:00:02

At the heart of the matter is a piece of human behaviour identified by Milkman in a study conducted with behavioural scientists Linda Chang, Erika Kirgios and Sendhil Mullainathan. The researchers asked a simple question: "Do we decide differently when some dimensions of a choice are quantified and others are not?"

The answer emerged loud and clear from a series of experiments: yes, we do. Whenever experimental subjects were offered a choice between two options, they would tend to favour whichever option looked better on numerical measures and overlook qualities that were expressed as graphical elements, letter grades, star symbols or in words ("moderate", "excellent", "highly likely"). This was true whether the choice was between hotels, job applicants, conference locations, public works projects, restaurants or charitable causes. Numbers loomed large. What was quantified, got attention.

This matters because fitness trackers purport to excel at quantifying some things and do not pretend even to quantify others. If quantification fixation applies, we would expect to see such trackers systematically pushing people towards the quantified behaviour at the expense of other things.

An early hint of this came in 2016, when the results of a study of weight loss in 470 people were published. All these people were trying to lose weight, all of them were prescribed a low-calorie diet and all of them were encouraged to exercise. Only half of them, however, were given fitness trackers. To the barely concealed glee of journalists, who love a counter-intuitive finding, the results of the study showed that, after two years, the people who had lost more weight were the ones without the fitness trackers.

Subsequent, larger studies strongly suggest that fitness trackers do not usually hinder weight loss, but the surprising and disheartening finding is an example in miniature of the quantification-fixation problem.

In this case, both groups were equally active, but those using a fitness tracker were getting automatic, effortless validation of their effort, which they could then use to justify more indulgent eating. The lead researcher, John Jakicic, speculated at the time: "People would say, 'Oh, I exercised a lot today, now I can eat more.' And they might eat more than they otherwise would have." Calorie counting is joyless, easily fudged – and not automated by the watch.

We're all familiar with the tendency to be virtuous in one aspect of our behaviour, then let ourselves off the hook somewhere else – choosing a healthy salad, then using it as permission to order dessert. Psychologists call this behaviour "self licensing" and fitness trackers encourage it by supplying us with asymmetric data. We are told how much we moved, but not what we ate. We get stark feedback on

It's one thing to coax a couch potato to go for a walk, another to guide an ageing writer to his first marathon. Yet I had put my watch in charge heart rate and step count, but the tracker looks the other way if we order french fries and a glass of beer.

Here's another instructive example of the way quantification can lead us astray. In a small experiment conducted by Rob Copeland of Sheffield Hallam University, some volunteers were asked to hit the timeworn target of 10,000 steps a day, while others were told instead to take three brisk walks a day, each of about 10 minutes. One of these exercise regimes requires a wearable computer; the other, nothing more than a pair of shoes. Three brisk walks aren't close to 10,000 steps; in total they are more like 3,000 – not that anyone is counting.

When Copeland studied fitness-tracking data from all the volunteers, he found that those who had done the human-centred exercise of a few short walks had actually done almost a third more "moderate to vigorous" physical activity than the ones grinding out a step count for the algorithm, and found the task less of a chore.

Even on the narrow grounds of cardiovascular activity, the unquantified walk beats the quantified one – and that is before we take into account the benefits of a chat with a friend or the feeling of the wind in your hair. The fitness tracker will handle quantity all day long. But the quality of a walk? That's up to us to defend.

Our digital devices are quantification machines. Try to count 10,000 steps as you go about your day and you'll drive yourself mad, but your watch will do it for you without you even noticing. But what gets counted isn't always what counts.

A brutal callisthenics session in the gym may leave me feeling that I've given everything, but the watch sees only my heart rate and is unimpressed. My Taiji practice is a form of gentle exercise that I greatly value, but as far as my watch is concerned I'm not really exercising at all. None of this would matter much if quantification fixation didn't exist, but it does. It is human nature to take the watch and the activities it quantifies more seriously than they deserve.

00:00:03

Over the past 18 months, my virtual coach has paced me to my longest runs and my fastest runs, prodded me to pull on my running shoes and head out the door even when I didn't feel like it, and broadened the (admittedly narrow) horizons of my training routines. But it has also nudged me into some decisions I regret.

Last winter, I went out running when some of the roads were covered in sheet ice. I avoided mishaps by gingerly picking my way over the obstacles, only to find the algorithm grumbling that I had not run fast enough.

A month ahead of my first flat 10k race, I picked up a minor injury. A coach would have told me to rest and heal, but I worried that the algorithm's "adaptive" training plan would be derailed if I didn't keep going. (Many of these training plans call themselves "adaptive" but I have yet to find one that explains how this adaptation works.)

In the end I resolved the tension between my need for recuperation and my desire for a personal best by going to my local park three weeks before race day, gritting my teeth and running the PB I'd been aiming for. Then I switched off the training plan so that I could heal. I doubt I would have achieved the PB without the watch – but I also would never have behaved so oddly.

There's a word for losing sleep because you're worried about being judged by your sleep tracker: "orthosomnia". I'm lucky enough not to worry much about my sleep, but I do worry about my running. It's easy to see how the powerful lure of a training plan that understands neither ice nor injury could prompt me and others like me into counter-productive overtraining – even permanent damage.

Some of these risks come from poor product design. Garmin's Connect app, for example, prominently celebrates "streaks" of exercise, meaning the number of consecutive days in which I've recorded some kind of activity. Yet any coach will tell you that rest days are vital, so it is strange that my main fitness app applauds me for the number of consecutive days in which I have failed to take a rest.

Other risks are more subtle. When I signed up for the Runna app, for example, it suggested what seemed an absurdly aggressive target for my first marathon time – almost an hour faster than Garmin's race prediction. The first training run the app proposed was at a blistering pace.

I spoke to Walter Holohan, the chief technology officer of Runna, who was keen to emphasise that the Runna training plan was personalised and it would use a proprietary algorithm to adapt the training schedule to my performance. Could he share any details?

"Obviously, we wouldn't want to share our proprietary algorithms," he explained. Obviously. I've not yet found a company that will. But that leaves users taking things on trust.

"It's understandable, of course, because they've got competition between one another," says Joe Warne of the Sports Science Replication Centre at Technological University Dublin. "They don't want to share their secrets of how they've arrived at these values. But the more that we continue to do that, the less that we're going to have any real insight."

Given that the history of fitness trackers begins with someone picking 10,000 steps because it's a nice-sounding round number, the lack of transparency and independent verification of these apps and devices is not wholly reassuring. They are not being sold as medical devices, so regulators do not get involved.

I am often told that older runners need more time to recover between each run, so I asked Runna's Holohan to reassure me that Runna would take into account the fact that I was 52 years old. Alas, he could not. Age-adaptive plans were still on the drawing board, he told me. So were training plans that reflected the menstrual cycle of female athletes.

Reassurance was no more forthcoming from Garmin. The company wouldn't make anyone available for an interview, and ducked every question about whether the Garmin training recommendations took into account my age.

Facing a marathon, then, which app should I choose? I respect their behavioural savvy and would expect any of them to tug my strings like an expert puppet master, but I am less confident of the physiological science behind their recommendations, as their methods are secret and their pretensions to rigour largely untested.

I don't mean to be ungrateful: my inexpensive Garmin watch and the free coaching app that was bundled with it took me from weekly wayward 5k runs to a well-paced half-marathon. But perhaps I have come to expect a little too much from my silicon coach.

Before my half-marathon, my Garmin app told me my predicted time was 1hr 54 minutes and 56 seconds. Strava, looking at exactly the same data, told me I could go a full 11 minutes faster. Even over a distance of more than 21km, 11 minutes is a huge difference. This put me in a quandary before the race. Everyone warned me not to go off too fast – but given the yawning gap between the algorithmic forecasts, what did "too fast" even mean?

"If you spoke to two different humans they might do the same thing," says the digital health expert Maher. "It's easy to believe that technology just has the answer."

A fair point. I'd never tried to set a half-marathon time before, so any forecast would be little better than a guess. Yet that did not stop both Strava and Garmin making their race predictions to within the nearest second. And it did not stop me taking both of them seriously, and hesitating when they contradicted each other.

00:00:04

IT IS A SOBERING EXPERIENCE TO STARE at a marathon training plan.

Monday – Strength Training – 30 minutes
Tuesday – Fartlek ("speed play") run – 10 minutes @6:05/km. 8 mins @5:35/km, 2 mins easy. 5 mins @ 5:15/km, 90 sec easy. 4 mins @5:10/km, 90 sec easy. 3 mins

I asked Runna's technology chief to reassure me it would take into account the fact that I was 52. Alas, he could not

ELIZABETH HARROD & STEVEN MCRAE, SOLOIST & PRINCIPAL, THE ROYAL BALLET

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> Garmin's app told me my predicted half-marathon time was 1hr 54 minutes and 56 seconds. Strava told me I could go a full 11 minutes faster

@5:00/km, 90 sec easy. 2 mins @4:50/km, 90 sec easy. 1 min @4:35/km, 90 sec easy. 10 mins @6:05/km
Wednesday – Easy Run – 45 mins @6.05/km, 15 mins @5.45/km
Thursday – Cross Training – 45-60 mins
Friday – Strength Training – 30 mins
Saturday – Threshold Run – 15 mins @6:05/km, 5 x 5 mins @5:05/km with 1 min rest after each, 15 mins @ 6:05/km
Sunday – Long Run – 120 minutes @6.05/km

That's week one. It would be an oversimplification to suggest that the following 15 weeks are the same, but further and faster – but not a grotesque one. Although such a training block isn't easy, it isn't complicated either. With your fitness watch on and the training schedules programmed in, just pull on your shoes, head out the door and follow the watch's orders.

But the longer I have followed this sort of plan, and the more I spoke to people in the world of fitness trackers, the more I feel that there is something missing – something unquantifiable. Serendipity, perhaps? Variety? Playfulness? Look again at that Tuesday "speed play" session. Speed, yes. But there is nothing playful about it.

These training plans are relentless and not just in the obvious fashion, where a 52-year-old body with niggles and twinges and the occasional 14-hour work day faces an implacable silicon coach which refuses to negotiate. My physiotherapist shook her head in exasperation when I told her I was planning to use the Runna app for my marathon preparation. Having seen too many people allow an app to overtrain them into injury, she urged me to think again.

But the relentlessness comes in another guise, too. It isn't just the grind and the risk of injury, but all the times I passed up opportunities that the watch and the training plan could not quantify – opportunities to run with a friend or my wife or my informal local running club. The watch tends to have other plans, and I do not want to disappoint the watch. That is the nature of quantification fixation.

As I reflected on these missed opportunities, I realised that running apps could, in principle, set us a very different kind of training programme.

00:00:05

In 1976, David Bowie fled to West Berlin. Beset by legal troubles, drug abuse and a disintegrating marriage, he later recalled, "It was a dangerous period for me." In the shadow of the machine-gun nests along the Berlin Wall, it seemed an unpromising place to make a record. But Bowie had a way of finding new challenges and constraints, which may be why he asked Brian Eno to join him.

Eno began showing up at the Hansa Studios with a selection of cards he called Oblique Strategies. Each card had a different, often baffling instruction:

- *Emphasise the flaws*
- *Only a part, not the whole*
- *Change instrument roles*

Eno would draw a single card at random, and push the musicians to respond. They did not necessarily approve of his randomised provocations – "This experiment is stupid", complained guitarist Carlos Alomar – but it is hard to argue with the results: two of the decade's most critically acclaimed albums, *Low* and *Heroes*.

Years later I asked Eno what the idea of these cards was supposed to be. "The enemy of creative work is boredom," he told me. "And the friend is alertness." The random inscrutability of the cards kept generating new situations and new problems. And, as a result, pushed the musicians into situations that could be frustrating but could also be exciting.

So what about injecting a little excitement into marathon training with the occasional Oblique Training Run?

Monday, gym. Tuesday, easy run. Wednesday, go for a run dressed as superman.
Monday, gym. Tuesday, easy run. Wednesday, pack a picnic, run somewhere nice, get the bus home.
Monday, gym. Tuesday, easy run. Wednesday, get a head torch and run in the dark.
Run with a fast friend.
Run with a slow friend.
Make three people smile.
Run a route that draws a picture on the Strava map.
Run with a different soundtrack.
Run in silence.

I'm in training now; wish me luck. My fitness watch will be a vital part of my training practice, but it won't be the only part. If you see an economist running up the river Thames dressed as Superman or carrying a picnic, that is because in running, as in life, much of what matters cannot be measured.

In their ability to track our running metrics, plot out complex progressions, and push us hard, fitness watches are a wrist-borne marvel. If I make it to the start line of the London marathon in April, I will have my watch on my wrist, pacing every step.

But like Pheidippides, I'll also hope to have joy in my blood.

Tim Harford's marathon run is in aid of the Teenage Cancer Trust. tinyurl.com/HarfordMarathon

THE

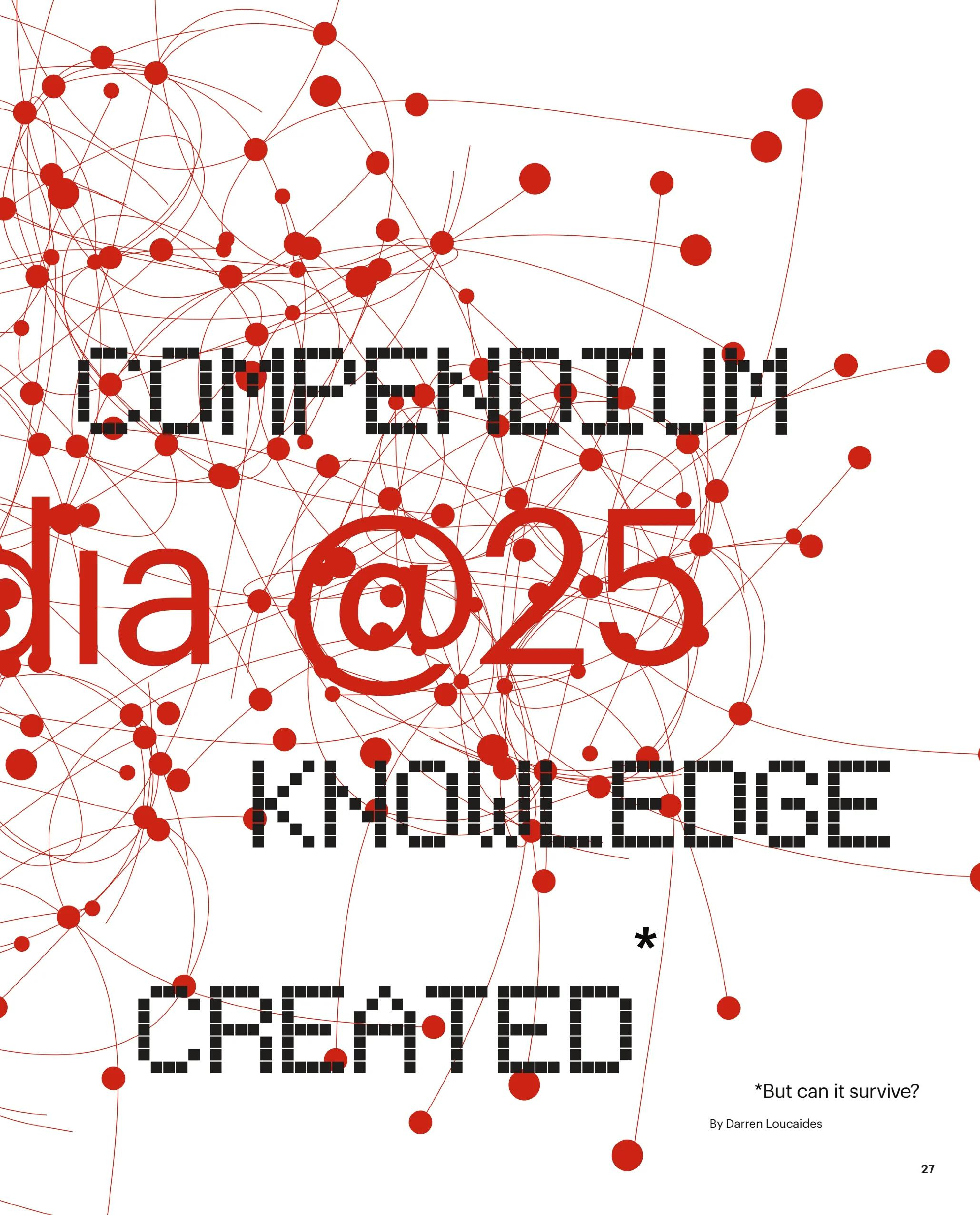
LARGEST

OF

Wikipe

HUMAN

EVER



COMPENDIUM dia @25 KNOWLEDGE CREATED*

*But can it survive?

By Darren Loucaides

The noise was rising in the main auditorium of Civic Hall near Union Square, Manhattan, as old friends and complete strangers greeted each other. I took a seat near the front. The crowd was eclectic: hipster-geeks with purple or green hair, young hackers in hoodies, boomer techies in tight T-shirts. More of them were male than female, but not by much. Everyone was excited, friendly and just a little awkward. It was like one part *Star Trek* convention, one part alternative music concert.

This was WikiCon North America, an annual gathering of Wikipedians, as those who contribute to the online encyclopedia are known, staged here last October to mark New York City's 400th anniversary. Wikipedia's own major milestone was round the corner: on January 15 2026, the website would turn 25.

Maryana Iskander, CEO of Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit that runs Wikipedia, took to the stage. Dressed in a red trouser suit and white trainers, Iskander was two minutes into her speech when a tall young man draped in a multi-coloured flag approached her on stage. He was holding something aloft, pointed at the ceiling.

"I'm an anti-contact, non-offending paedophile," he addressed the audience. ("What the fuck!" came an outraged shout.) Raising his voice, the man went on, "I'm going to kill myself to protest Wikipedia's 'don't ask, don't tell' policy..." (Wikipedia's policy is in fact that editors "who identify themselves as paedophiles will be blocked and banned indefinitely.")

The penny dropped: what the man was holding above Iskander was a gun. Things happened quickly. An organiser on stage moved towards him. The pistol swept the crowd for an instant. Everyone ducked behind chairs. The organiser was joined by another and together they wrestled the man to the ground. They stayed wrapped around him, holding his still-firmly-gripped pistol away from the audience as we filed out. The gun, as later revealed by police, was loaded.

As we crammed into the next-door building, there were a few tears and at least one person having a panic attack, as well as some gallows humour: "That might be the only excitement here," said a guy in a baseball cap. Later, someone pointed out that this is the sort of thing that gets updated in real time on Wikipedia; indeed within minutes there was a new edit about the incident on the event's page.

The NYPD arrived. A bomb squad was on its way. When the gunman was brought out of the building and placed in the back of a police car, he looked impassive, almost emotionless. An editor who goes by Barkeep49 told me that it was inevitable that Wikipedia attracted people from extreme niches. "I think we have seen in the world that we're living in, we've been reminded just how dangerous free information can be," he added. We used to think of free information as a democratising force, innately good, but "that's not the world that we have [now]".

A couple of hours later, I sat down with Iskander. The 50-year-old, Cairo-born former COO of Planned Parenthood was tough and leaderly. She deflected my questions about how she was feeling. "Are *you* OK?" she asked, having noticed me sitting only a couple of rows away in the audience when the incident happened. "On the one hand, the thing that makes Wikipedia truly magical is that it's open to anyone who shares our vision and our values," opined Iskander, who is stepping down on January 20 and had quipped onstage about giving a speech on her way out the door. The incident is an example of the tension that can emerge "when a thing can belong to everyone and no one all at the same time". It shouldn't paint a whole community. Her phone lit up with the name of Wikipedia's founder, Jimmy Wales. "Hey, Jimmy, I'm fine," she said, excusing herself. "I am absolutely fine. Absolutely fine. Everybody, everybody is fine."

This wasn't, of course, the story I came to New York to report. As Wikipedia neared its quarter century, I wanted to investigate whether the website can survive myriad challenges from regulators, AI, the far right and Elon Musk. But the incident spoke to the febrile atmosphere in the US and beyond. As Wales himself points out in his new book *The Seven Rules of Trust: A Blueprint For Building Things That Last*, one in five Americans believe they may have to resort to violence to get their country back on track. The internet has made it feel like each of our tribes inhabits different, irreconcilable realities. And yet somehow, on Wikipedia, people manage to reach a consensus every day. How did that happen?

BEFORE WIKIPEDIA'S BIRTH IN 2001 THERE WAS Nupedia, and before Nupedia there was Bomis, a male-oriented web portal cofounded by Wales, a former options trader. Bomis was set up as an alternative to Yahoo, an index for the early internet, but it became a favourite for those seeking soft-porn content. In 2000, Wales founded an online encyclopedia with funding from Bomis, and hired its first employee, the philosophy PhD student Larry Sanger, who Wales knew from an Ayn Rand listserv he used to run. The idea was that it would be written by volunteers.

Nupedia was not a success. Volunteers had to submit a CV to prove they were experts on their topic and follow a seven-step process. A year in, Nupedia had just over 20 articles. Wales and Sanger decided to pivot, launching a "wiki" of Nupedia, a type of website that allows multiple users to create, edit and hyperlink pages. The expert volunteers weren't keen, so the pair created a separate site called Wikipedia. This time people showed interest. By the end of the year, it had about 18,000 articles.

From the start, Wikipedia called for volunteers to use a neutral point of view, or NPOV. Wales and Sanger were not prepared for its vertiginous growth, though, and there were few other guidelines. Sanger, who oversaw the site's day-to-day operations, lost the faith of many volunteers for seemingly overstepping his authority. When Bomis was hit hard by the dotcom bubble burst, Wales told Sanger that he was cutting staff and let him go. Wales decided the website didn't need a manager. He became its "God-King", as some Wikipedians ironically dubbed him, wading into debates only when strictly necessary, and ultimately becoming a sort of constitutional monarch.

In his book, Wales likens Wikipedia's development to the four-century evolution of Britain towards an elected parliament with a head of state whose roles are largely ceremonial. ("So you're the King Charles of Wikipedia?" I asked him when we met in November. "Well, I hope not. I go more for Elizabeth II.") From Wikipedia's start, Wales "deliberately decided I didn't want to be the dictator of all human knowledge," he told me. "That sounds terrible. I am not the boss of anybody, but I do think I can play a part and a role in reminding and coaching and cajoling."

In its early years, Wikipedia was mocked for being unreliable. Unlike Nupedia, or Encyclopedia Britannica, which went online at around the same time, you didn't need to be an expert to write or edit an article. Without even logging in, you could edit a page. As Wikipedia grew, it developed a rigorous system for what an article needed to contain. Debates in "talk" pages improved the quality, particularly on contentious issues like, say, abortion. From early on, a "talk" tab at the top of any Wikipedia article allowed readers to see the discussion between editors of the page about everything from the sources used to whether the language was objective, or what the title should be.

Today Wikipedia is, for many, a beacon of what the internet once promised to be: a democratising vehicle for information, bestowing free knowledge on one and all. If you Google something, the top result has long been a Wikipedia entry. Now, as people increasingly use AI tools like ChatGPT, the results they see are in no small part based on Wikipedia; today's large language models have been trained on Wikipedia's millions of articles. This has led to a decline in eyeballs on Wikipedia, Iskander tells me. Some long-time Wikipedians privately also worry about declining editor numbers. For now, though, Wikipedia remains in the top 10 most viewed websites, while eschewing the business model of the other top platforms: Google, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Amazon. This crowdsourced, nonprofit website has become the largest compendium of human knowledge ever created. That doesn't mean it will survive the most challenging moment in its history.

NOT LONG AFTER ELON MUSK CELEBRATED Donald Trump's inauguration at the Capital One arena on January 20 2025, a revision appeared on the tech billionaire's Wikipedia page. A user called PickleG13 added: "At a rally following the second inauguration of Donald Trump, Musk appeared to perform a Nazi salute." Behind the scenes, PickleG13 acknowledged in a note to fellow editors that "this controversy will be debated", but as news reports were already saying "Musk may have performed a Hitler salute," PickleG13 felt the revision was warranted.

Two minutes later another user undid the revision. Debate ensued as to whether the incident was important enough to merit inclusion. A user called Johnny Rose 11 added a longer edit, writing that Musk made a gesture "widely viewed as being a Nazi salute", only for another user to expand the paragraph with comment from the Anti-Defamation League claiming it was an "awkward" gesture and not antisemitic. Over the next few days, dozens of edits were made. Eventually a gif of Musk's gesture was added to the article and a separate page created for the incident, with several thousand words spent in the talk page on what the article should be called. This was Wikipedia's global wired knowledge machine in all its messy glory.

The day after the inauguration, Musk reposted a screenshot of the addition to his Wikipedia page, attacking the website for being "an extension of legacy media propaganda!" He also reposted a tweet about the site's supposed left-wing bias, writing: "Defund Wikipedia until balance is restored!" Jimmy Wales replied to Musk's tweets: "Is there anything you consider inaccurate in that description?" The Wikipedia entry wasn't "MSM propaganda", he insisted.

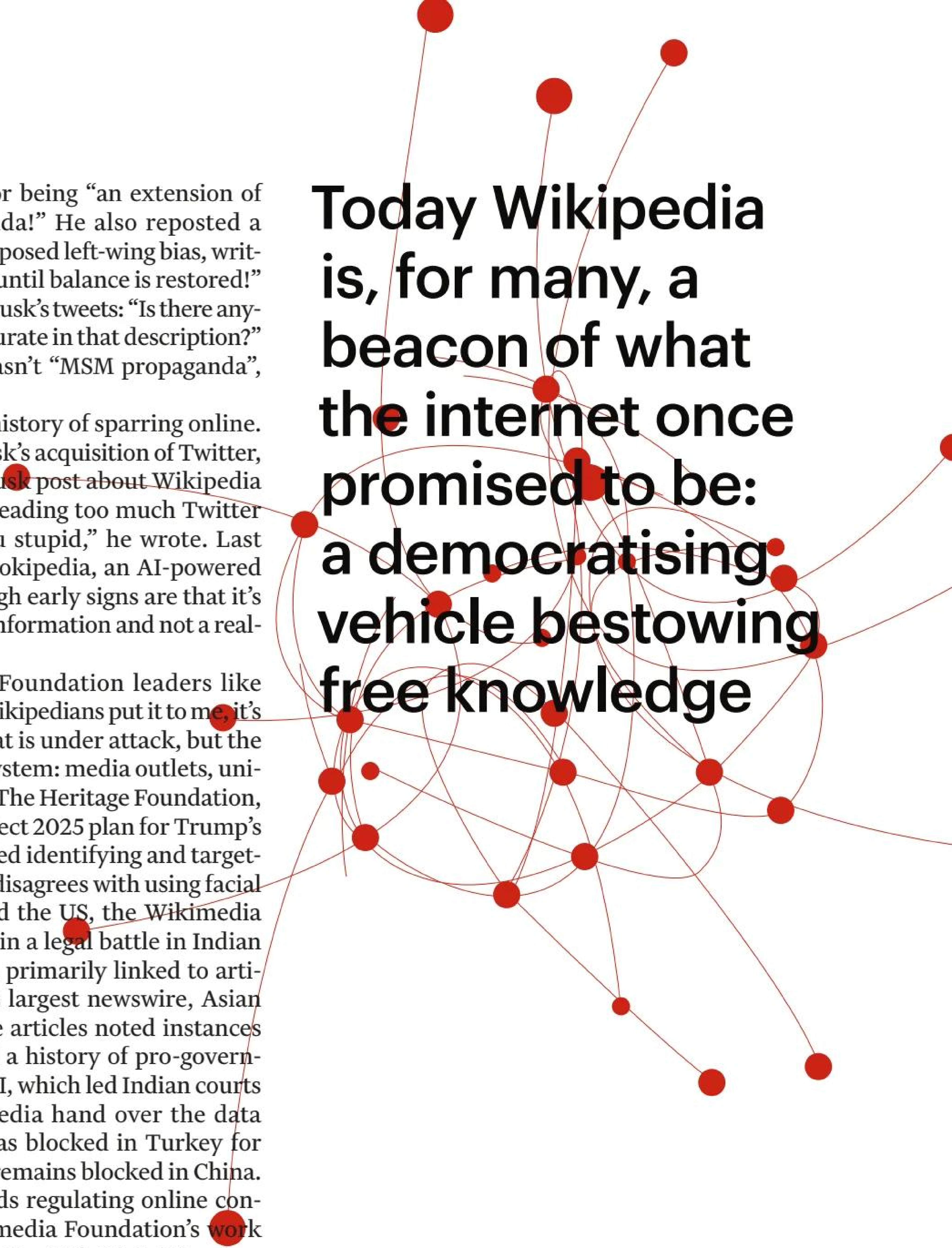
The two men have a history of sparring online. Back in 2022, before Musk's acquisition of Twitter, Wales responded to a Musk post about Wikipedia losing its objectivity: "Reading too much Twitter nonsense is making you stupid," he wrote. Last year, Musk launched Grokipedia, an AI-powered rival to Wikipedia, though early signs are that it's awash with far-right disinformation and not a realistic alternative.

As both Wikimedia Foundation leaders like Iskander and ordinary Wikipedians put it to me, it's not just their website that is under attack, but the entire information ecosystem: media outlets, universities, even libraries. The Heritage Foundation, which produced the Project 2025 plan for Trump's second term, even mooted identifying and targeting Wikipedia editors it disagrees with using facial recognition. And beyond the US, the Wikimedia Foundation is currently in a legal battle in Indian courts over defamation, primarily linked to articles about the country's largest newswire, Asian News International. The articles noted instances of anti-Muslim bias and a history of pro-government propaganda on ANI, which led Indian courts to demand that Wikimedia hand over the data of editors. Wikipedia was blocked in Turkey for almost three years, and remains blocked in China.

A global trend towards regulating online content risks making Wikimedia Foundation's work untenable. Laws such as the EU's Digital Services Act and the Online Safety Act in the UK fail to differentiate the website from for-profit platforms, Wikipedians claim. Where governments compel platforms to take more responsibility for content posted by users, they could force Wikipedia to go dark in their countries.

WIKIPEDIANS OFTEN USE PSEUDONYMS TO PROTECT their identity. The reasons vary, but editors have been harassed and, in some countries, prosecuted. As for the user who goes by ScottishFinnishRadish, it's best he stays anonymous due to the sensitive nature of his work – as well as for his safety. The interruption of the gunman at WikiCon was in protest at ScottishFinnishRadish blocking him eight months earlier (in a public statement, the latter would later criticise the Wikimedia Foundation for, in his view, failing to keep attendees safe). He's not your typical Wikipedian. New England born and bred, he's a big guy with a shaved head, beard, khaki cargo pants, heavy boots. He's a gun owner, hunter and homesteader. He raises his own meat. "I call myself a small 'l' liberal," he told me on day two of WikiCon. In his worldview, "Gays, good; trans, good; guns, good." People are entitled to their rights, and corporations aren't people, he says, deep-voiced and jovial. "But on the Wikipedia spectrum, that puts me way over to the right."

ScottishFinnishRadish has spent a lot of time over the years he's been editing trying to address problems with articles on right-wing figures. "Most of the editors are liberal," he doesn't mind saying.



Today Wikipedia is, for many, a beacon of what the internet once promised to be: a democratising vehicle bestowing free knowledge

The beauty of Wikipedia is that, in theory, anyone can edit anything. The downside is when there's an avalanche of bad actors on a top-viewed page

WIKIPEDIA FOUNDER JIMMY WALES

"People are biased, and even if you're aware of your own biases, it still will come out, especially in aggregate, over, you know, 1,000 people working on something." Is an article on a particular political figure correct in calling them "far right"? Even if ScottishFinnishRadish personally believes the categorisation to be accurate, Wikipedia isn't about personal feelings. Reliable sources must back up every assertion. If an opinion piece from the progressive magazine Mother Jones is your only source for someone being "far right", that's not going to cut it, he said.

Adherence to Wikipedia's foundational neutrality was put to the test on September 10 last year with the shooting of Charlie Kirk, the right-wing activist and cofounder of Maga-aligned student organisation Turning Point USA. Kirk's death led droves of people to his Wikipedia page, many trying to edit it. Right-wingers complained that it was biased – for highlighting that he had called Martin Luther King "awful", perpetuated the Great Replacement theory, or repeatedly made offensive statements about Black people – while left-wingers turned up to disparage him.

The beauty of Wikipedia is that, in theory, anyone can edit anything without even having to log in. The downside is when there's an avalanche of bad actors on a top-viewed page. As the debate raged in the days after the shooting and people kept trying to interfere with the article, ScottishFinnishRadish, who is a member of the website's arbitration committee, twice changed the settings on Kirk's page. First, he locked changes to all but administrators for 48 hours. Then he permitted edits only by "extended confirmed" users – that is, users who have had an account for 30 days and made more than 500 edits – due to "persistent vandalism" by autoconfirmed accounts.

It soon became apparent Kirk's shooting merited its own page, which itself attracted controversy; entitled "Killing of Charlie Kirk", some thought it should instead be "murder", as on the page "Murder of George Floyd". After thousands of words of debate on the article's talk page, it ended up being called "Assassination of Charlie Kirk". In ScottishFinnishRadish's personal view, this was inaccurate; reliable sources had so far avoided using the term, and given that the suspected assailant hasn't been convicted yet, "assassination" seemed premature. "But it's one of those situations where it's not worth the argument," he told me with a good-natured grin.

Kirk's main page, which would become Wikipedia's most-read article of 2025 with nearly 45 million views, was always going to be the focus of tensions. "We often jokingly say, 'If it's a problem in the real world, it's probably a challenge on Wikipedia too,'" said Anne Clin, a long-time editor and administrator who goes by the username Risker. Over the years, the website has developed robust processes for limiting the impact of excessive zeal one way or the other, she said.

"A lot of energy and effort was taken to guide people and to make sure that bad things didn't wind up in the article that were inappropriate," Clin told me in a video call from Canada, where she lives. "I mean, we are talking about a human being who we have to take care of, not allowing somebody to harm their reputation unnecessarily… It was a horrendous, incredibly traumatic event for anybody who was in that crowd. Horrendous tragedy for the family."

Despite the furore over Kirk's articles, they ultimately demonstrated how well Wikipedia works. People with very different viewpoints managed to come together and agree on a middle ground. In 2019, researchers studying Wikipedia's talk pages published a paper entitled "The Wisdom of Polarized Crowds" in the journal Nature Human Behaviour. They found that politically diverse groups of editors "create articles of higher quality than politically homogeneous teams".

Wikipedia's critics don't see it that way. In October, Republican senator Ted Cruz sent a letter to Maryana Iskander about "ideological bias" on the website in his capacity as chairman of the commerce, science and transportation committee. This followed a letter in August from the House of Representatives' Oversight Committee, which asked for "records" of Wikipedia's arbitration committee in relation to studies and reports of "systematic efforts" to advance antisemitic and anti-Israel information on Wikipedia, as well as hostile nation-state actors manipulating the site to expose readers to pro-Kremlin and anti-Western propaganda. Even Sanger, questionably addressed as a Wikipedia "cofounder", attacked the website for being biased against conservatives in an interview on Fox News. When I asked Iskander about this, she replied that the Foundation needs to do a much better job of explaining Wikipedia's inner processes to the outside world.

WIKIPEDIA'S MOST CONTENTIOUS TOPIC AREA by far is Israel and Palestine. ScottishFinnishRadish had been "patrolling", in Wikipedia jargon, the topic for more than a year before being elected in early 2025 to the arbitration committee, a kind of judicial body made up of trusted volunteers endowed with advanced permissions to protect the website. By then he had already pored over millions of words of discussion on talk pages and placed dozens of sanctions on users who had gone against Wikipedia's rules. While his wife watched horror films, he would be on his phone, thinking to himself: "Yep, got to keep track of all this."

The aftermath of Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel made the work of administrators harder. "People would show up and say, you know, Israelis are evil and they deserve that, or Palestinians are evil and deserve that," he recalled. He would immediately block such users. From the start, the word "genocide" was used by both sides.

ScottishFinnishRadish soon realised he needed to go to the arbitration committee to request they tighten rules and require that only "extended confirmed" users take part in page discussions. This went against Wikipedia's policy of being open to all, but if nothing changed, he said, every discussion would be "95 per cent people who don't know how Wikipedia works, 3 per cent people trying to explain to them how Wikipedia works. And 2 per cent Wikipedians arguing [in good faith] and getting lost in the noise."

As with any other topic on the site, the ultimate question is whether you're there to build an encyclopedia, or to right wrongs. If you've come to Wikipedia to push your point of view, you've come to the wrong place, said ScottishFinnishRadish. With a sensitive topic, if the person

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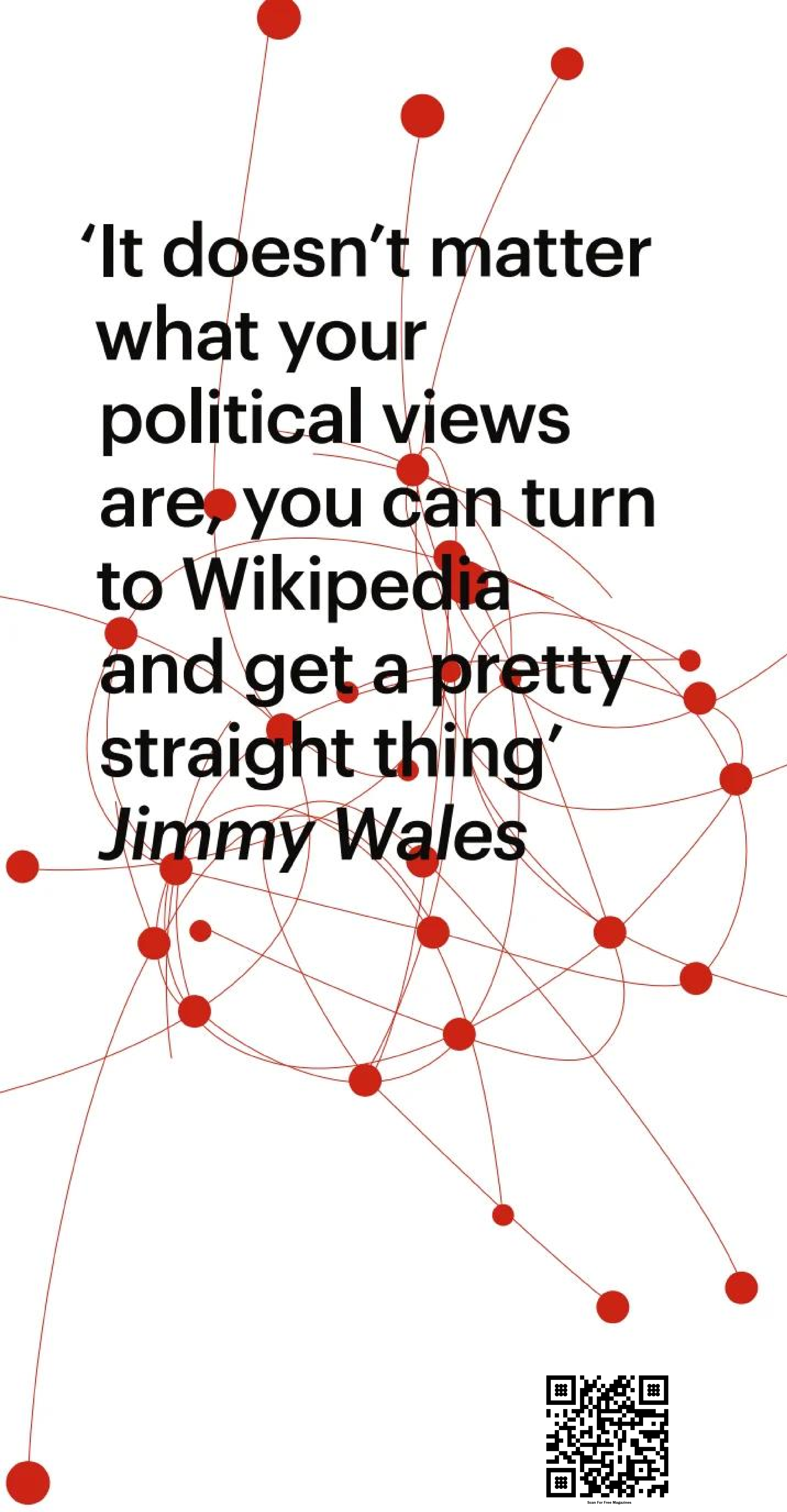

‘It doesn’t matter what your political views are, you can turn to Wikipedia and get a pretty straight thing’
Jimmy Wales

isn’t contributing to healthy discussion and – crucially – consensus building, they are barred from the topic. They can continue editing, just not in that topic area.

As people crowded in to claim that this or that was wrong, ScottishFinnishRadish tried to remind himself that Wikipedia had a convoluted, complicated system that newcomers inevitably struggled to understand, and that tensions were high. Few realise that there are literal novels’ worth of text behind articles. For Wikipedians, discussions are measured in “tomats”, the length of Hemingway’s *The Old Man of the Sea*, which is 26,500 words. Sometimes a single sentence can take three tomats to resolve in the talk pages.

One of the pages in the Israel-Palestine topic that attracted the most heat was one entitled “Gaza genocide”. And into this debate, founder Wales himself would eventually wade.

THERE WAS A DOG ON THE TRACKS NEAR Kilburn, west London, causing my Tube train to terminate early. I was trying to reach The Arts Club, a distinguished members’ club in Mayfair where I was due to meet Jimmy Wales. My lateness only added to the trepidation I already felt. The previous week, a video of Wales storming out of an interview after one minute went viral on X; the interviewer had kept insisting he was the “cofounder” rather than founder of Wikipedia, alluding to Sanger’s role (which Wales freely discusses in his book).

When I arrived, Wales was gracious and amiable. It was almost December, a few weeks since WikiCon in New York, and we were seated in the garden with heaters and fairy lights, surrounded by smartly dressed people. Wales, 59, who lives in London with his wife Kate Garvey, was wearing skinny black jeans, white trainers and a colourful shirt of red Paisley teardrops and floral patterns. (His membership of the Arts Club is honorary; unlike most of his early-internet-era peers, Wales is far from a billionaire.)

He had an unassuming air that was rather endearing. At times he leant forward and grew more animated, gesturing with one hand while the other remained in his lap, but he was generally mildly expressive and softly spoken. Flashing keen-eyed smiles from behind black specs, he tended to go off on tangents. His circuitous way of speaking reminded me of Wikipedia itself, as though he was amending things in real time, discarding, ending up somewhere unexpected, circling back. It made it a little difficult to talk about the site’s “Gaza genocide” article.

A few weeks before our meeting, Wales posted to the article’s talk page criticising the lede and overall presentation of the article for stating, in Wikipedia’s voice, that Israel was committing genocide. It was a “violation” of the website’s neutral point of view, he wrote, which “requires immediate correction”. Al Jazeera mistakenly reported (and later corrected) that Wales himself had locked editing on the page. The report seemed to misunderstand how Wikipedia really works. Whatever his personal feelings about Israel and Palestine, even Wales, the website’s founder, couldn’t force the wording to be changed: revisions could only be made through painstaking discussion by Wikipedia’s editors. An administrator had instead restricted the page to long-time “extended confirmed” editors on October 28 2025. The article remains restricted, with debate ongoing among users over issues with its content.

When I asked him about the page, Wales said its problems were a sign he needed to use his role more to emphasise Wikipedia’s neutrality. “I think that’s particularly true at a time where we’re being called ‘Wokipedia’,” he said. “And I’m really keen that we double down on neutrality in these times, because it’s part of what is so valuable and so trusted about Wikipedia, which is to say it doesn’t matter what your political views are, you can turn to Wikipedia and get a pretty straight thing.”

As he spoke, I was thinking about Wales’s self-avowed constitutional monarch role and how he determines when it’s suitable for him to intervene. Drawing him back to the question about the “Gaza genocide” article, I asked what exactly he saw his role as being when he got involved. “I just raised the question,” he replied. “I’m like, ‘This is not OK,’ right?” Recently Wales has been leading a “neutral point of view” working group with Wikimedia Foundation’s research team and Wikipedia community representatives to improve understanding and support for NPOV across a wide range of cases. It’s a conversation he thinks Wikipedians need to have: “If people feel like we’ve decided that we want to take sides on issues, it’s going to be a big problem in the long run,” Wales said, adding, “Nothing magically changes overnight, but I think we’ll get there. I’m always optimistic.”

The debate on the talk page will, indeed, continue for months. This is not one man dictating to his underlings. The bottom-up way Wikipedia works makes that largely impossible. Unlike other tech platforms, this is one built on incremental steps, even at the operational level. Wikimedia chief product and technology officer Selena Deckelmann told me that, due to extended consultation with the community, Wikipedia’s first new user interface in 10 years, which was given the name Vector 2022, couldn’t actually launch until 2023. Although a universal code of conduct was created in 2020, in-depth discussions meant that enforcement guidelines took more than two years to be negotiated and approved. It all reminded me of the Ents, the ancient tree people in *The Lord of the Rings*, taking forever to debate whether to go to war. But this laborious emphasis on process is what makes Wikipedia robust.

That doesn’t mean there aren’t risks, as we saw at WikiCon. With growing political violence in the US and elsewhere, Wales worries that people in positions of influence aren’t doing more to try to calm the rhetoric. Wikipedia is very important to a lot of people, firing up strong emotions just like the rest of the information ecosystem, but the only way we can move forward, Wales said, is to seek compromise. “There’s really big issues facing the world, and it’s not helping if we’re just at each other’s throats, and it definitely isn’t helping if there’s violence.”

At one point during WikiCon, long-time Wikipedian Rosie Stephenson-Goodknight told me that someone texted her after the incident with the gunman to say: “We’re just trying to write an encyclopedia!” She replied: “Amen.” The texter was Jimmy Wales. FT

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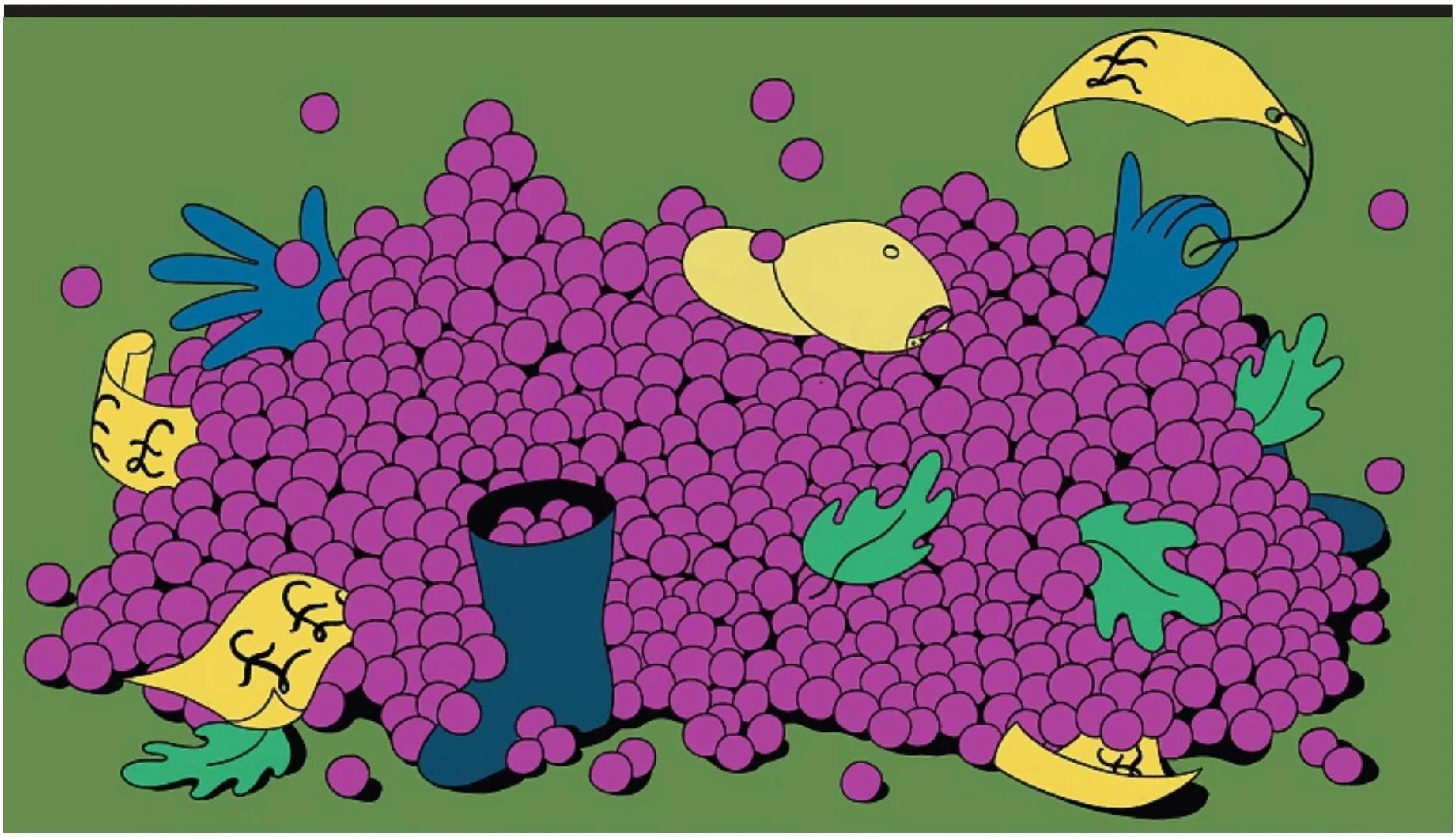

Wine

A world with too much wine

by JANCIS ROBINSON

ILLUSTRATION by DEBORA SZPILMAN

Reading about the current whisky loch set me thinking about the glut of another alcoholic drink, my favourite one, wine.

Whereas some distillers have had to build new warehouses to mature their excess stock in, that's not an option for the great majority of wine produced today, which is designed to be drunk within a year. Moreover, while Jim Beam can simply choose to close down its much-advertised production base in Kentucky for at least this calendar year, just as any distiller or brewer can simply pause production, no such option is available to wine producers. Vine growers are presented with a crop every autumn or, increasingly, late summer.

Grapes are currently ripening relentlessly in the southern hemisphere, but what will happen to them? The generic body Wine Australia admits that producers there have nearly twice as much wine in stock as they can reasonably expect to sell, and sales are in decline pretty much everywhere, even in Australia itself. Tanks full of wine, and a relatively generous 2025 grape crop, have led to widescale cancellation of

JANCIS RECOMMENDS

WINES FROM DIFFICULT VINTAGES

If you're looking for wines that are considerably cheaper than these, see my October 2025 collection of wines under a tenner.

WHITES

- **Montecillo, Viña Monty Reserva 2018 Rioja (13%)**
  £40 WAITROSE CELLAR
- **M Chapoutier, Lieu Dit Fels Riesling 2021 Alsace (13%)**
  £47.80 MILLESIMA UK

REDS

- **La Rioja Alta, The Society's Exhibition Reserva 2020 Rioja (14%)**
  £17 THE WINE SOCIETY
- **Ch de Pez 2021 St-Estèphe (13%)**
  £22.80 FOUR WALLS, £37.20 MILLESIMA UK
- **Dom des Hauts Chassis, Les Galets 2021 Crozes-Hermitage (13%)**
  £26.75 CORNEY & BARROW
- **Bodega Lanzaga, Lanzaga 2017 Rioja (14%)**
  £28.92 LAY & WHEELER
- **Cigliano di Sopra 2023 Chianti Classico (13%)**
  £29.75 REDUCED FROM £35 SWIG
- **Ch Gloria 2017 St-Julien (13.5%)**
  £43.20 FOUR WALLS
- **Petrolo, Boggina A Anfora 2017 IGT Toscana (13%)**
  £51.59 LAY & WHEELER
- **Arnaud Mortet, Ma Cuvée 2021 Gevrey-Chambertin (13%)**
  £95.54 IDEALWINE
- **Vieux Château Certan 2017 Pomerol (14.5%)**
  £162.60 LAY & WHEELER,
  £213.20 CORNEY & BARROW

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grape contracts and a substantial proportion of grapes are expected to be left on the vine yet again this year.

Along with the most beleaguered wine districts of Bordeaux and the southern Rhône (whose wines can be found retailing in France for less than €2 a bottle), the irrigated inland wine regions that supply 70 per cent of all Australian wine are some of the world's most obvious casualties of shrinking global demand. To add insult to injury, irrigation water has recently become much more expensive. Growers there feel particularly sore when they read of government-provided financial compensation to French vignerons who pull out vines.

Things are not helped by the fact that Australian wine production is dominated by two large, globally spread companies that would have been expected to absorb much of the surplus wine had their prospects been brighter. Treasury Wine Estates owns brands such as Penfolds and Wynns in Australia, and a slew of California wine brands, some acquired relatively recently. It warned investors that profits in the second half of last year would be considerably less than expected because of the weakness of its two biggest export markets, the US and China. The other large Australian wine group, whose name was recently changed from Accolade to Vinarchy and whose answer to TWE's Penfolds is Hardy's, took on Pernod Ricard's brands when the French drinks group gave up on wine in 2024. It is currently pinning its hopes on a revival of the likes of Jacob's Creek of Australia and Campo Viejo of Spain.

It was powerful red wine, especially Shiraz, that led Australian wine's export boom at the end of the last century and such wines are by far the chief product of the country's most challenged wine regions. But global tastes are moving towards white wine and lighter, fresher reds.

> Unlike distillers or brewers, wine producers do not have the option of simply pausing production

Kim Chalmers of Chalmers Nursery, the leading supplier of grapevines to the Australian wine industry, is based in inland Mildura, where the biggest winery by far was shut down by Treasury Wine Estates in 2024. She reports that growers in the region "are busy grafting-over or replanting to whites, although the swing has been hard and, like all reactionary permanent-planting changes in agriculture, we could see the pendulum go too far". Chalmers points out that spot market pricing for 2026 white grapes is already lower than in recent years. "Industry bodies have started calling it an overcorrection."

Even New Zealand, long considered a bright spot in wine exports with relatively high prices and a predominance of white Sauvignon Blanc, is currently suffering a glut.

IT'S COMMONLY BELIEVED IN WINE CIRCLES THAT THE global downturn in consumption may not be disastrous overall because it will mean that consumers will drink less but better. I too expected wine to be seen increasingly as an

FIRST SIP

HOW MUCH DOES A VINTAGE MATTER?

Much more than other alcoholic drinks, wine is crucially affected by each year's weather – not just in terms of the quantity produced but also its quality. Vintages really do matter, even – and increasingly – in warmer wine regions. In cooler times we thought that all that was needed for a good vintage was sufficient heat, light and water to ripen the grapes fully. But now that we're experiencing far more hot, dry summers, the heat can be overdone and the fruit can lose the acidity and freshness that's essential for a really appetising drink.

However, the climate is not just warming up, it's becoming far more extreme and unpredictable. Wildfires, floods, hail, crop-reducing frost and severe heatwaves are all becoming more common. But some years, and in some regions, there are still summers that are so cool and/or wet that grapes struggle to ripen. The vine is so prone to fungal diseases that wet weather can lead to mildew and rot that can ruin a crop, or certainly a vintage's reputation, and require the almost uneconomic rejection of unhealthy grapes.

It's clear that vintages can vary enormously, and tend to have their reputations made early on, largely as a result of the weather during the growing season. But this can be unfair. The Burgundy 2024s currently being offered, for instance (about which I will write next week), are the product of a seriously trying cool, wet growing season. As in 2021 in the region, it was a real struggle to end up with ripe, healthy grapes and vintage reports of rampant and persistent mildew have tended to colour perceptions of the vintage. But there are some creditable wines from each of these two years – just not for long-term cellaring.

Good producers can be relied upon to make good wines, no matter what the growing season and harvest conditions. Many of them relish expressing vintage variation as much as terroir. Opposite, I recommend some stunning wines from vintages with less-than-stellar reputations.

occasional luxury, with mid-priced wines prospering and bottom-shelf supermarket wines the most obvious casualties.

However, when I asked my wine writer colleagues in Italy and Spain, the world's first- and third-biggest wine producers respectively, which wine regions in their respective countries were doing best, the results were surprising. Both reported that those regions which are suffering least are those that sell wine in bulk, the cheapest sort of wine available. According to Walter Speller's UK-based Italian wine broker informant, the only wines that are doing well are those that are being sold to the trade for €2 or less a bottle. There's reluctance to lose face by admitting to personal difficulties but most regions report cellars full of unsold wine.

Unlike the Italians, Spanish wine producers are swamped by efficiently collected statistics on sales volumes and prices for each region. According to the most recent figures, for the first nine months of 2025, the extensive Rioja region, heavily dependent on red wine and currently celebrating the centenary of its becoming Spain's first official appellation in 1925, is under real pressure with the volume of exports down by 18.5 per cent. Sparkling white Cava may dominate wine production in Catalonia but its sales have slumped even more. Two of the few Spanish wine regions registering growth are Valencia and Castilla-La Mancha, the latter being one of the world's major suppliers of bulk wine (and grape concentrate), at an average of about €47 a hectolitre, or €0.47 a litre. Germany and France are the two biggest buyers, much to the dismay of the Languedoc's militant vignerons over the Pyrenees.

Ciatti, headquartered just south of Sonoma in California and with branches in 10 of the world's major wine-producing countries, is the world's leading bulk wine broker but even it reports that its customers are ordering relatively small volumes.

Fortunately for Australia, this year is not looking like a bumper crop and the harvest won't be as hot and rushed as last year. Ciatti partner and president Greg Livengood expects the total 2026 southern hemisphere grape harvest that will be picked in the next few months to be very slightly smaller than in 2025, helped by a considerable reduction in Chile's productive vineyard area. South Africa's wine production is more or less in balance but Argentina, like Australia and New Zealand, is already oversupplied with bulk wine and he is advising stockholders to try to sell, "even at less-than-ideal pricing".

We can expect to see white and pink southern hemisphere 2026s on our shelves in the next few months from producers desperate for cash flow, but presumably the wine trade's professional wine buyers can more or less dictate prices.

Review

Poon's, the Strand

by JAY RAYNER

ILLUSTRATION *by* DANIEL EGNEUS

I eat alone in Chinese restaurants more often than in any other type of restaurant, happily lost in the rhythmic swish of chopstick to mouth and back again. Hence, I have a highly developed mental map of the right places. For dim sum it's Dumplings Legend on Gerrard Street, where cooks stand in a glass-walled cubicle by the door, pleating xiao long bao. There may be technically better dim sum in London, but few can beat its bustle and value. For Cantonese roast meats I head a few doors up to Four Seasons, where the duck has a dark, salty, lacquered skin, and I could happily spoon the sauce neat from a bowl. For Sichuan food it's Barshu, across in Soho; and for seafood it's Mandarin Kitchen on Queensway, which is quietly the best-value place in London for Dover sole. And for the fancy stuff? It's Min Jiang on the top floor of the Royal Garden Hotel Kensington, with its shiny surfaces, salted egg-yolk dishes and magnificent view out over Hyde Park.

A few dishes into dinner at Poon's, wilfully hidden down echoing stone corridors at Somerset House off the Aldwych like it doesn't want to be found, I conclude it will never plant a flag on my mental map. It's a different sort of Chinese restaurant. There are backlit shelves filled with crockery and Poon's branded product, and sweet murals of forest branch and leaf scampering up the oatmeal walls. The wooden-floored rooms

FIND IT

POON'S

New Wing, Somerset House, Lancaster Place,
London WC2R 1LA
020 7759 1888
poonslondon.com

Snacks and starters £3-£12
Large dishes £12-£28
Desserts £6

are dominated by communal marble slab high-tops and are patrolled by ineffably cool waiters in collarless jackets of deep blue, who may or may not always make eye contact. It feels like a Chinese restaurant for people who don't always feel comfortable in Chinese restaurants.

It certainly doesn't feel like a place for eating alone. It's a date-night restaurant, and one with impressive lineage. Its founder, Amy Poon, is the daughter of Bill and Cecilia, who founded the original Poon's in Chinatown in 1973 before moving to Covent Garden where, in 1980, it won a Michelin star. It was famed for attracting Barbra Streisand and Mick Jagger, and for serving sweet, savoury and sticky wind-dried meats made to an old family recipe from Macau. On the website Amy says that, despite working in her parents' restaurants, she was determined not to go into the business. And yet here we are.

It is a logical extension of a branded product business, because Amy became known in recent years for fabulous silky-skinned wontons delivered by post, for the toastiest and darkest of chilli pastes in stumpy jars with beautifully designed labels and, of course, for the wind-dried meats. This however is a major brand extension. The best dishes are those that draw directly on the mail-order business products.

There's a section headed "wontoneria" which offers a variety of them in soup or, if you're looking for a wake-up call, a chilli vinegar dressing which will put lead in an entire box of Caran d'Ache. The pork version are the words "silky" and "soothing" made steamed flesh. We have a plate of wind-dried sausage to pick at, and then a claypot topped with a layer of more wind-dried meats leaking their sweet fats into the rice below. Do chip away at the crisped rice on the bottom. Dishes of chilli oil and soy sauce add bright blasts of heat and umami, even if the smears they provide are less than generous. We also have a whole steamed seabass, with ginger and spring onion, which is an expert piece of fresh and pearly fish cookery.

But the offering is as uneven as a cobbled track, which is not helped by the menu writing. One starter is headed, obliquely "The Hill That Amy Didn't Die On". Later, I learn that this is an in-joke because Poon once said she'd never serve prawn toast, but I'm not in on the joke. Plus, her instincts were right. This serving of prawn toast here is two weirdly tasteless, extremely expensive tiny globes. She should have stayed on that hill and fought.

Another is simply headed "Ode to Fuchsia", which may be a reference to the Chinese food expert Fuchsia Dunlop. Many won't have a clue, and none of us will know why it's there. A dish of chopped wind-dried meats and diced vegetables, to be eaten wrapped in lettuce leaves, needs chilli oil to make it sing, but we have to ask for it. And then there is the sad, limp and lifeless "Covent Garden Roast Duck Salad", which plays as a halfhearted exercise in leftovers, the original source of which is lost in time. Perhaps the problem is the building, where naked flame is banned, which perhaps explains why they've decided not to serve any stir fries. This kind of Chinese restaurant without those feels like a joke without a punchline.

There is an extensive wine list, overseen by Amy's husband Michael Mackenzie, which in places reflects the Portuguese influence on Macau. But no amount of Vinho Verde will improve the dessert offering "such as it is", as our waiter says. There's a choice of a lychee sorbet or what's listed as "Three bites of Helen Goh", another mystifying reference, this time to one of Yotam Ottolenghi's collaborators. This brings a square of good chocolate truffle, a dull sponge cake and two shamefully bad pieces of mottled and fibrous mango, which should never have been let into any kitchen, let alone out again. The plate is plonked on the table with what feels like understandable embarrassment.

The new Poon's is a beautiful space. It reflects the elegance of Amy herself, who is on duty tonight. But right now, it's serving a peculiar menu of great highs and thudding lows. In a city blessed with terrific Chinese food options, that feels profoundly odd. FT

jay.rayner@ft.com

PHOTOGRAPHY *by* SAM A HARRIS

Recipe Club

Sausages in style for winter

Last summer chef Ben Lippett marked the publication of his first cookbook with an FT Magazine feature on how to host the perfect summer dinner party using only the sort of rickety equipment and limited ingredients you'd have access to while in a holiday rental. It was a delicious menu, but seasonal propriety meant Ben couldn't showcase one of his greatest passions: delicious slow-cooked recipes for winter, such as this one.

He describes the preparation of the lentils as a story of two halves: "You first gently poach them and infuse them with earthy, vegetal notes; then, once they're almost cooked, they are finished with butter, lemon and a zippy horseradish salsa verde." The result is proof that frugal, nutritious January food can be exciting too.
Harriet Fitch Little

DRINK
This is a dish that can stand up to a powerful red.

TIP
When slow cooking, Ben recommends dicing vegetables less finely than you might otherwise. "If you start with a super-fine dice, a few hours later you'll have mush."

SUBSTITUTIONS
Toulouse sausages have a distinct garlicky edge, says Ben, but if you can't find them just use whatever sausages you like.

BEN LIPPETT'S SAUSAGES WITH LENTILS AND HORSERADISH SALSA VERDE

For the lentils
- 200g dried puy lentils
- 2 onions
- 1 carrot
- 1 celery stick
- 1 leek
- 1 bouquet garni (bay, rosemary, thyme)
- 8 Toulouse-style sausages
- 150ml dry white wine
- 15g unsalted butter
- 1 lemon
- Olive oil
- Fine sea salt
- Black pepper

For the salsa verde
- 200g spinach
- 25g flat-leaf parsley
- 10g tarragon
- 20g nonpareille capers
- 1 small garlic clove
- 2 tsp hot horseradish sauce
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Fine sea salt

1 Tip the lentils into a large saucepan. Chop up one of the onions, the carrot, celery stick and the green half of the leek, saving the sweet white half for later. Add the bouquet garni, cover with cold water and season with salt.

2 Bring to the boil, then reduce to the barest of simmers and cook for 20-25 minutes, or until you can squash a lentil between your thumb and forefinger, but they aren't completely tender. Once you're there, add a handful of ice cubes or a splash of cold water to slow down the cooking process.

3 Allow the lentils to rest in the cooking liquor for five to 10 minutes before draining, reserving the cooking liquid and discarding the veggies and bouquet garni.

4 Preheat the oven to 180C fan and finely chop the remaining leek and onion.

5 Place a large ovenproof sauté pan or cast-iron pot over a medium heat. Before it's hot, add a shot of olive oil and sit the sausages inside. Hear the sausages start to sizzle as the pan comes up to temperature and cook for two or three minutes on one side, then flip and repeat. Remove the sausages, add a little extra olive oil and toss in the onion and leek. Sweat with a pinch of salt for three or four minutes. Add the white wine and reduce until the pan is almost dry, then add the lentils and a few ladles of the cooking liquid – just enough to pool out of the lentils.

6 Sit the sausages on top and slide into the oven for 10–12 minutes.

7 To make the salsa verde, bring a small pot of water to the boil. Add the spinach and parsley, stalks and all, and cook for one minute. Scoop out the greens and refresh with cold water. Squeeze as much moisture as you can from them then add to a blender.

8 Add the leaves from the tarragon, the capers, peeled garlic clove and horseradish sauce with a pinch of salt and a generous glug of olive oil and blend into a smooth, green salsa. Add a little cold water or extra oil if you need to get things moving. You want this to be thick, not too runny, so go easy.

9 Remove the lentils from the oven, whip the sausages off and add the salsa verde to the pan along with the butter. Swirl into the lentils until rich, bright green and emulsified. If you need to add a little more of the cooking liquor to loosen things up, go ahead, you want the lentils nice and saucy. Finish with the grated zest of the whole lemon and half the juice, adding more if you like. Spoon the lentils on to warm plates and top with the sausages.

This recipe appears in "How I Cook: A Chef's Guide to Really Good Home Cooking", published by HarperCollins

NEXT WEEK – A STARTER FOR BURNS NIGHT

Project Kitchen

Cast-iron wisdom

The dos and don'ts of cooking with a skillet.

By *Tim Hayward*

PHOTOGRAPH *by* KENNETH LAM

I love cast-iron pans. My first arrived with my first wife. She'd got it from some relation with one of those brilliantly improbable sobriquets of the southern United States, like grammy or neenaw. I never met her. She was generations back in a mist of family legend, but they said her skillet had done the Oregon Trail. It's hard to communicate how much the pan was loved. Worshipped like a relic, it embodied so much more in an old southern family than a couple of kilos of rough pig-iron really ought. It also looked no different from a pan you'd pick up in a kitchen shop today – and indeed, some companies are still using the same patterns to manufacture them. A "pattern" is a pre-existing pan, or a beautifully carved wooden version. This is packed around with wet sand to create a mould into which, after the pattern has been removed, molten iron is poured. The mould is broken as each pan is turned out, so it's unique, but of gorgeously unfathomable ancestry. Much like my ex-wife.

If you get your skillet out and take a close look, you can actually see the texture of the sand grains on the surface of the metal, and sometimes the line or ridge around the outer rim of the handle where the two halves of the mould met. It's a weird thing, but every time I pick up a skillet, a little reminder of a manufacturing process unchanged since the Iron Age pushes itself into the palm of my hand.

Many modern manufacturers then grind the outside of the base completely smooth. This is so the base makes full and efficient contact with an induction ring, if that's your heat source of choice. I use induction in my kitchen. It's modern, efficient, clean, controllable, cool and economical. It delights me, therefore, that it works in symbiosis with such a resolutely unmodern pan.

FOUR MYTHS OF SKILLET MAINTENANCE

The all-important finish on your skillet is not difficult to achieve, but it needs a little care if you want it to survive, develop and improve. But the rules, carefully codified by a shadowy cabal of huge, bearded men in check shirts, can seem terrifying.

1. It's difficult to 'season' a new skillet

No, it really isn't. It just takes some time. Wash it with a little detergent. Dry it. Use a piece of rag or kitchen roll to apply neutral vegetable oil to the inside. Don't pour it in, just rub it over, like furniture polish, until you can see an even gloss over the surface. Put the pan, face down, on a shelf in your oven and cook it at 200C for an hour. Take the pan out carefully and repeat. Just the thinnest possible "polish" of oil. I'm personally of the opinion that oil should never be poured into a pan while seasoning. Always apply the oil to a cloth or kitchen paper. There should never be drips, pools or runs. And repeat. And repeat. At least all of a Sunday afternoon, maybe six applications.

There is a practice in Wiccan and pagan tradition whereby a practitioner will use a scrying glass – either a piece of polished obsidian or a "dark mirror" in which to meditate and focus their powers. The inside of your skillet should be like that. You should be able to scry your future in it.

This may also be a superstition, but I always make the first thing I cook in a freshly seasoned pan fried chicken (see recipe on the next page).

By the way, these days you're likely to have bought your skillet "pre-seasoned", which is very convenient, but don't think you've escaped. At some point you're going to want to re-season it and the ritual is exactly the same.

2. You mustn't use metal utensils in a skillet

Well, yes, this is reasonably true. But it's better for all your pans if you use silicone utensils. If, however, something gets a little stuck or there are some particularly tasty-looking bits of scrackle that need scraping off the pan bottom, go ahead. The seasoned coating is tough enough to withstand a few scrapes with a flat-bladed, flexible metal spatula. Just don't do it all the time. And if your recipe suggests actively trying to build caramelisation on the bottom of your pan (a "fond" to professionals) then you should be using stainless steel, anyway.

3. You can't wash a skillet

Of course you can. But not like a modern cook, by neurotically shoving it in the dishwasher after every single use. Most times you use a skillet, the food will come out clean and leave nothing on the surface that can't be wiped off the still warm surface with a dry rag or kitchen paper. I hang the pan straight back on its hook, still warm, glinting dully and ready for the next time I use it. If there's a trace film of bacon grease on the pan surface, a homeopathic hint of clarified butter, that's the whole point.

If you're worried, either because there are a few traces of food stuck to the pan or because you've just fried up a load of fish and the next thing you're planning is crêpes Suzette, then use a brush, hot water and washing-up liquid. (I favour a soft, round scrubbing brush from Good Grips that has a reservoir in the handle for detergent.) Scrub only as hard as you need to. You will not damage the seasoning unless you go crazy. Rinse. Dry carefully (or even put it back in a warm oven for a few minutes) and then, before hanging it back up, give it the faintest polish of oil.

4. Acid food will destroy the coating

Acid in the form of citrus juice, tomato, vinegar or wine is essential to almost anything you'd ever want to cook and, true, if left in contact with the coating for hours, will soften it. But if I were slow cooking a boeuf Bourguignon for a perfectly sensible eight hours, I'd use a Le Creuset – cast iron that has, with brilliant foresight, been enamelled so it can take wine, vinegar, tomatoes and citrus.

A squeeze of lemon while cooking fish, a tin of tomatoes in a quick sauce and any kind of acidic deglazing will not have time to mess with your beautiful surface. Rinse afterwards, dry and put your pan to bed with a clear conscience and a song in your heart.

This, then, is The Way of The Skillet. You'll need a silicone spatula, a soft scrubbing brush, kitchen paper, a healthily Victorian pioneer attitude to cleaning and a constant, but deeply pleasurable, concern for the condition of your skillet. It's a good idea to store it by hanging it somewhere by its handle. Oil your skillet before putting it on the heat, and if anything sticks, you're probably not running hot enough. Wait, and it will usually detach itself.

More than any other kitchen utensil, except maybe the sainted AGA, the skillet is not something you merely acquire. You are going to move in with your skillet and share your life with it. It's best if you think of it as a pet, not a pan.

If you cannot manage these things, then the widely advertised and very expensive HexClad is recommended by celebrities.

WECK

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TIM'S CAMERA ROLL MY SKILLETS, ANNOTATED

New Orleans BBQ shrimp isn't actually barbecued at all. Fat shrimp is fried in loads of butter, hot sauce and lemon juice, doing no harm at all to the seasoning of a Hornbeam No10 skillet in which it's cooked and served.

HORNBEAMCOOKWARE.COM £125

Nothing beats a skillet, in this case a 300mm Lodge round skillet, for a thick steak like this bistecca Fiorentina. It can take the enormous temperature of searing, then go straight into the oven to complete cooking.

BOROUGH KITCHEN £60

Cornbread, fried, baked and served in a very swish two-handled skillet from Swedish maker Skeppshult.

SKEPPSHULT.UK £115

The Hornbeam No12 skillet has its inside surface machined smooth, so it does a lovely job when used on the stovetop of browning the outside of this smashburger in grilled sourdough.

HORNBEAMCOOKWARE.COM £145

PROPER FRIED CHICKEN

Any southerner will tell you that decent fried chicken only ever comes out of a skillet. Cast iron absorbs and holds heat and disperses it evenly. The method below is old-fashioned but takes maximum advantage of all the skillet's best features.

But firstly, a note on grease. Fried chicken is a culinary wonder of the Deep South, where embellishing low-status ingredients is considered the highest art, and there is no fear of fats. I fry my chicken in what I still refer to as "grease", a 1kg Kilner jar in the back of the fridge that starts with a couple of blocks of pork lard and is then reinforced with carefully husbanded duck, chicken, bacon and occasionally beef fat. After each chicken-frying outing, it is strained back into the cleaned jar. It lives for at least six months for normal people, but I'm going to admit here that there are at least parts of mine that go back years. I know few people are ready for grease, so you can use neutral vegetable oil if you wish, but please, please, have the decency to season it by crisping half a dozen rashers of streaky bacon in it before you start your chicken. The oil can also be strained and reused several times.

- *4 free-range chicken legs or 8 thighs*
- *500ml buttermilk*
- *Around 1kg of "grease" or 1l seasoned oil*

For the dredge
- *400g plain flour*
- *200g potato starch*
- *25g salt*
- *5g each garlic powder, cayenne, onion powder, dried English mustard powder, paprika, white pepper*
- *15g baking powder*

1. If I have time, and want to be insanely authentic, I'll start two days early and wet-brine the chicken for 24 hours in a 5 per cent salt solution. It's not essential, but it subtly ups the juiciness.
2. The day before cooking, marinate the chicken in buttermilk. You don't need gallons of the stuff if you marinate in a large Ziploc-style bag.
3. Mix all the dredge ingredients together and place them in another large Ziploc bag.
4. Put your oil or grease into your skillet. Please don't let it be more than two-thirds full when the chicken is loaded in. This is somewhere between shallow and deep frying, with all the attendant risks of the latter. Gently bring it up to hold at a temperature of 165C. This is where the skillet comes into its own. All that weight of cast iron holds heat so, when the chicken goes in and the grease temperature drops, there's stored, residual heat in the pan to bring it back up to temperature. Place your chicken pieces into the dredge, a few at a time, shake them about and then slide them into the hot oil. My biggest skillet is a No12 from Hornbeam in Stockport. It's 30cm in diameter and I'd never do more than four pieces in it at once. You can hold the finished chicken in your oven, set at 85C, but it's far more fun to serve it as it comes out of the pan, hot as hell and delicious. Your family will tear into it as soon as they dare and seconds later they'll be drumming their tools on the table, demanding the next round.
5. It's difficult to give an accurate time for cooking, as fried chicken is essentially an art, not a science, but you'll need to watch the chicken as it fries, using a probe thermometer to check that the oil is returning to 165C and when the chicken is done (85C at core). The trick here is to have the centre cooked before the outside is too brown. It's very dependent on many variables, but I'd never expect chicken to fry in less than 15 minutes.

A SHORT LIST OF THINGS YOU SHOULD AND SHOULDN'T USE A SKILLET FOR

A skillet is superb for
- Searing. It can take the heat and makes great crust on burgers, steaks, etc and then it's great for transferring to the oven to "finish". It's also good to serve from at the table (please, God, use a heatproof mat).
- One-pan combinations. The heat is regular, consistent and long lasting, so cut your ingredients to cook at the same speed and tumble them in. I love doing a whole fried breakfast at once in my largest skillet. Accept the challenge!

But it's dreadful for
- Slow braising if the liquid is acidic. If you're really into "low and slow", use enamelled cast iron.
- Anything where you need instant temperature changes. If you want to brown something, then lower the temperature to finish a delicate sauce, your skillet is going to take about 20 minutes to catch up with your desires. This is where you use stainless steel or copper, which are in effect "instant" response.
- Anything that you don't want to taste again. A cast iron skillet takes on, to some degree, the flavours of the food cooked in it.

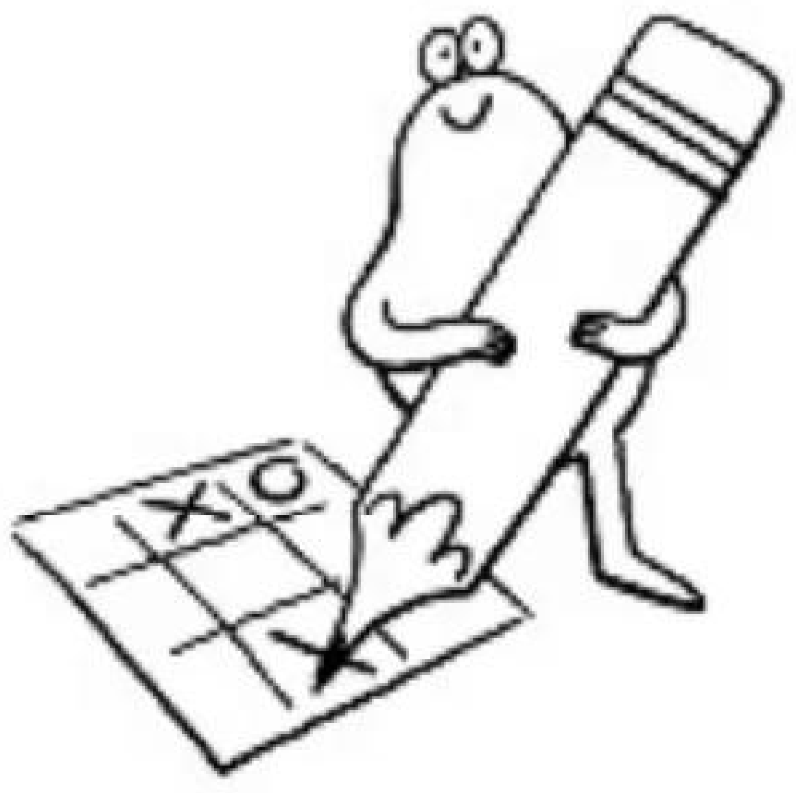
SKILLET CORNBREAD

The other southern staple that requires, nay demands, plying of the skillet is cornbread. Here, the pan's qualities of getting good and hot and staying that way mean that the outside of the cornbread effectively fries while the inside bakes.

- *300g cornmeal (white or yellow; it's purely an aesthetic choice. You can also use polenta – but not the quick-cook stuff)*
- *300g plain flour*
- *8g baking powder*
- *25g salt*
- *4 large eggs*
- *450ml milk*
- *20g melted butter*
- *10g lard or butter to grease the skillet*
- *Butter and syrup to serve*

1. Put your skillet into the oven and bring up to 200C. Let it stay there for a while, thoroughly preheating both oven and skillet. Meanwhile, mix all the wet ingredients in one bowl and all the dry ingredients in another.
2. Combine wet and dry and beat to a roughly combined batter.
3. Pull out the skillet (do not be tempted to touch the handle without a glove), melt your greasing medium into the bottom, swirling gently to cover the base and the sides, and bringing it up to full heat. Now pour in the batter and put the skillet back into the oven for 25 minutes.
4. The cornbread will be perfect when a skewer pulls out clean. Serve immediately in the hot skillet, with butter and syrup. FT

TIM HAYWARD



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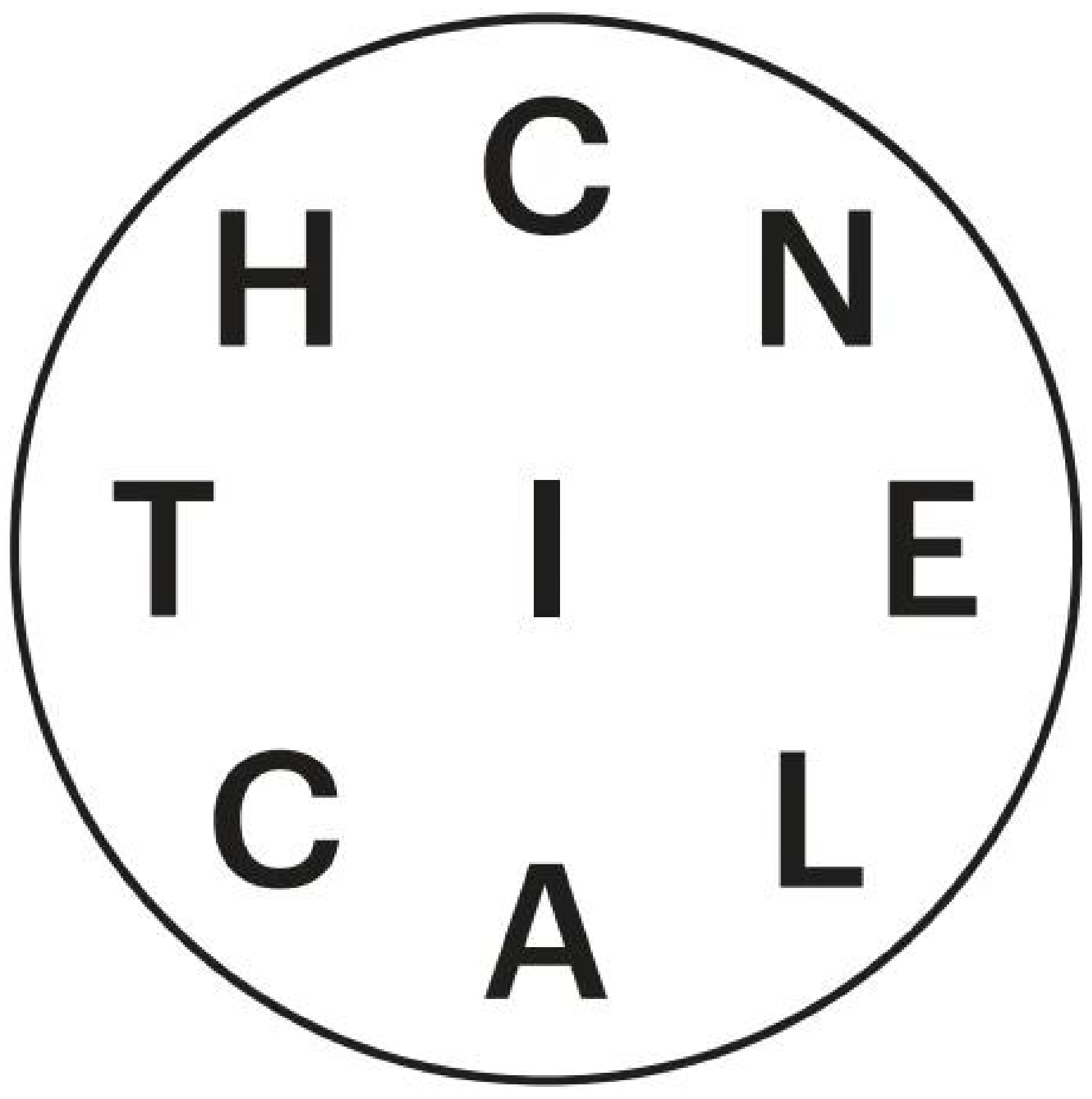
WORD CIRCLE

NO 92

How many words can you form that use the centre letter plus two or more of the other letters? No letter may be used more times than it appears within the circle. There is at least one word that uses all nine letters.



SCORING
GOOD – 30
GREAT – 40
AMAZING – 50

BINARY PUZZLE

NO 92

Place 0 or 1 in every empty square so there is an equal number of each digit in every row and column. In any row or column, there must be no more than two of the same digit in succession.

	0		1	0			1
0	0		0		1		
0	1				0		
				0		1	1
0	1		0				
		1				0	1
		0		0		1	0
1			0	1		0	

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THIS WEEK'S QUIZ ANSWERS

A round on the links
The link was spots of various kinds
1. *The Sleeping Beauty*
2. John Bright 3. Bald 4. *Grease*
5. Soft Cell 6. Liver 7. *Blind Date*
8. The Sun 9. Sweet
10. Hot Springs
("By any other name would smell as")

The picture round
Alistair Darling + Clementine Churchill
= Darling Clementine

SOLUTIONS

FOR ISSUE DATE
JANUARY 10

Mini Crossword No 91

N	E	M	E	S	I	S
O	■	A	■	I	■	P
T	O	N	N	A	G	E
I	■	T	■	M	■	C
C	U	R	R	E	N	T
E	■	A	■	S	■	R
S	U	P	R	E	M	E

Binary Puzzle No 91

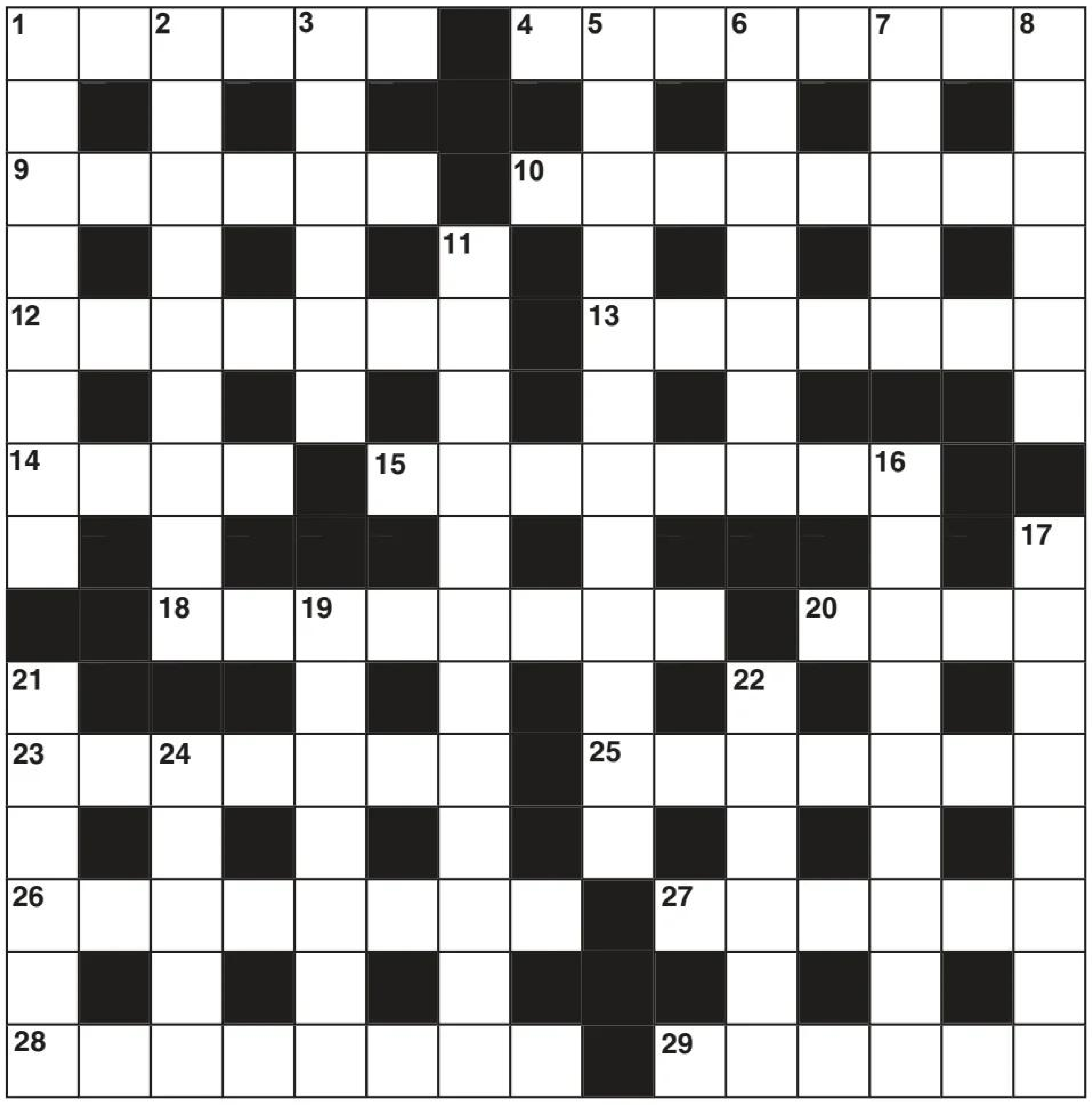
0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1
1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1
1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0
1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0

Word Circle No 91

ems, eon, eons, men, mes, met, **moonstone**, moose, mote, motes, neon, nest, net, nets, noes, none, nones, noose, nose, note, notes, omen, omens, one, ones, onset, sent, set, smote, some, sonnet, stem, stone, ten, tenon, tenons, tens, toe, toes, tome, tomes, tone, tones, tonne, tonnes

THE CROSSWORD

NO 776 SET BY ALDHELM



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

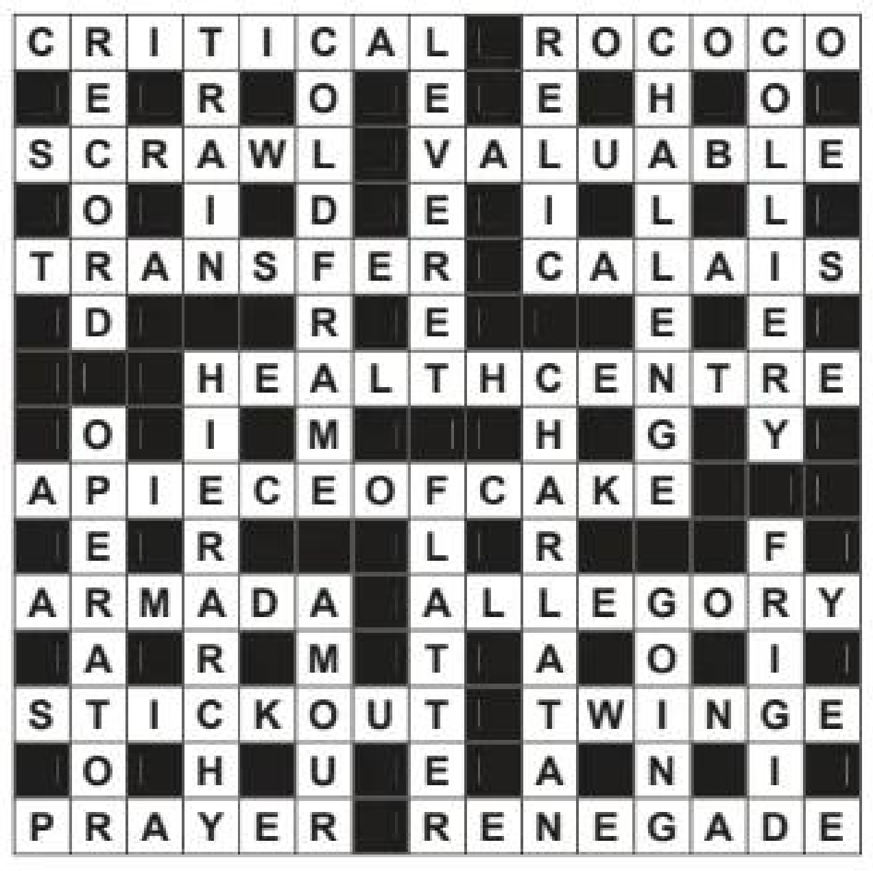
ACROSS

1 Building for cars (6)
4 Brawled (8)
9 Lowly, subservient (6)
10 Example (8)
12 Clergy salary (7)
13 Naive young woman (7)
14 Ancient Roman poet (4)
15 Logical, cogent (8)
18 To do with sailing (8)
20 Close by (4)
23 Return game in sport (7)
25 Spotted big cat (7)
26 Hat seller (8)
27 Cord (6)
28 Add comments to (8)
29 Imbue, implant (6)

DOWN

1 Try taking on a network with TV competition (4, 4)
2 Performance in trio's orchestrated, including finale (9)
3 Stones guitarist initially left after mad party (6)
5 Very large cable dries out without working (12)
6 Exhaustion from stout, I guess – mostly (7)
7 Revolutionary leader taken in by fallen insurrection (5)
8 Fuel metal cutters with first bits of electricity (6)
11 Publicity number is hard stopping second warning (12)
16 Believer takes blame for health worker (9)
17 Reckless elbow one criminal raised (8)
19 Straighten out wonky nut's width – it's wonky (7)
21 Lawlessness overcomes a disputed territory (6)
22 Gained time cooking Chinese dish (6)
24 Little time to take in the Italian city in Lombardy (5)

Crossword No 775

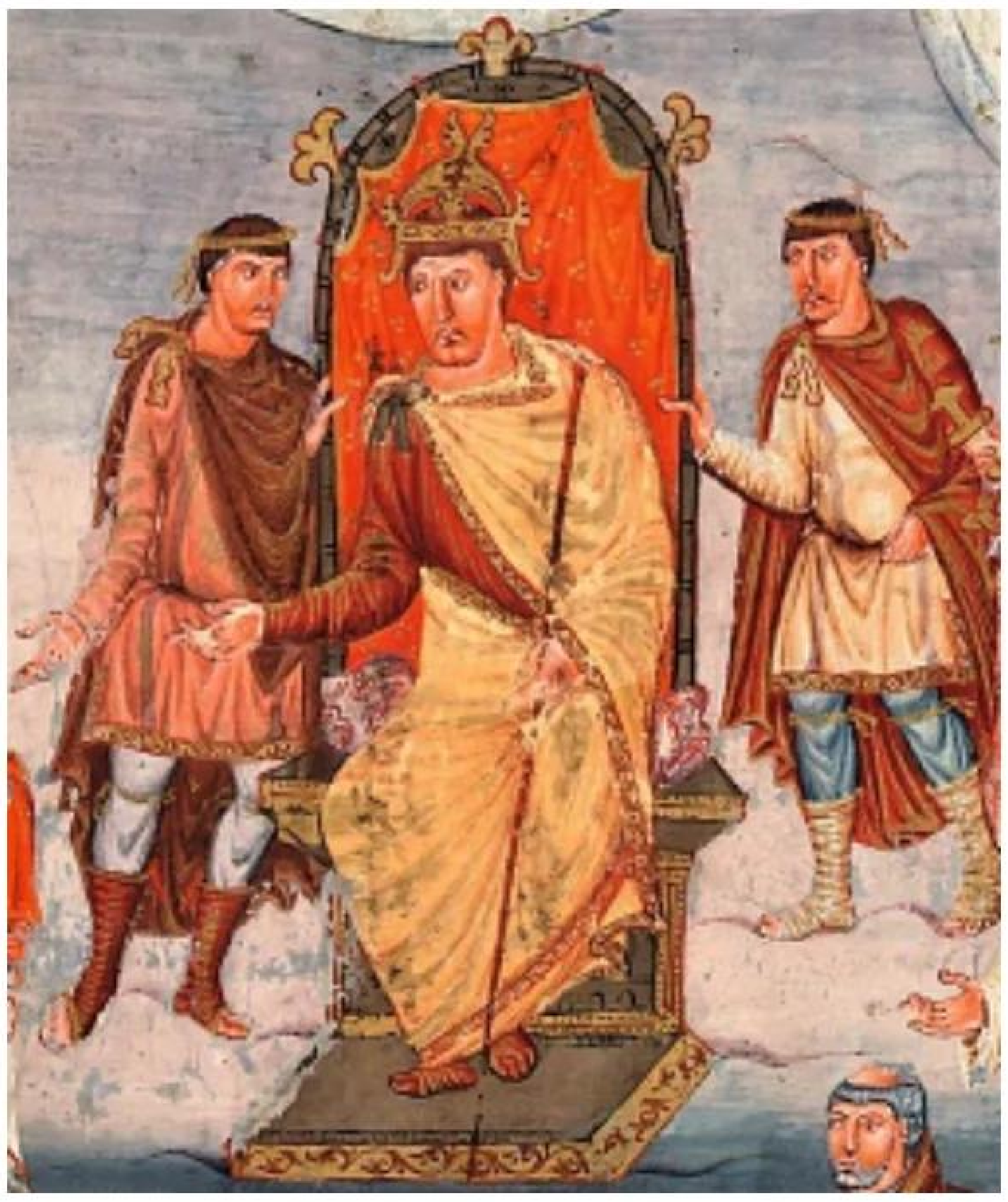


C	R	I	T	I	C	A	L	■	R	O	C	O	C	O
■	E	■	R	■	O	■	E	■	E	■	H	■	O	■
S	C	R	A	W	L	■	V	A	L	U	A	B	L	E
■	O	■	I	■	D	■	E	■	I	■	L	■	L	■
T	R	A	N	S	F	E	R	■	C	A	L	A	I	S
■	D	■	■	■	R	■	E	■	■	■	E	■	E	■
■	■	■	H	E	A	L	T	H	C	E	N	T	R	E
■	O	■	I	■	M	■	■	■	H	■	G	■	Y	■
A	P	I	E	C	E	O	F	C	A	K	E	■	■	■
■	E	■	R	■	■	■	L	■	R	■	■	■	F	■
A	R	M	A	D	A	■	A	L	L	E	G	O	R	Y
■	A	■	R	■	M	■	T	■	A	■	O	■	I	■
S	T	I	C	K	O	U	T	■	T	W	I	N	G	E
■	O	■	H	■	U	■	E	■	A	■	N	■	I	■
P	R	A	Y	E	R	■	R	E	N	E	G	A	D	E

GETTY IMAGES

A ROUND ON THE LINKS

BY JAMES WALTON



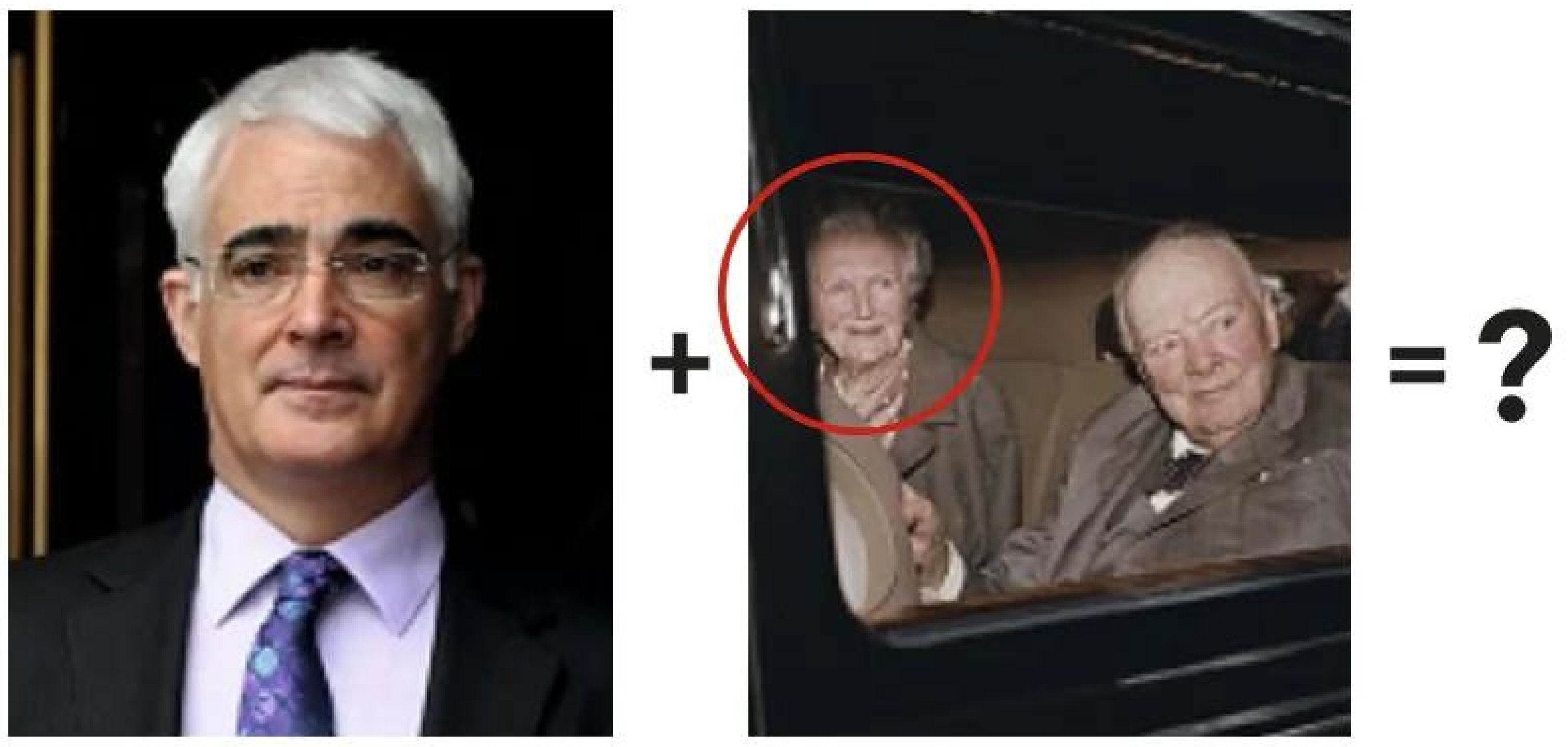
All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the connection, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

1 What was the second of Tchaikovsky's three ballets?
2 The two main leaders of the Anti-Corn Law League were Richard Cobden and… who?
3 The ninth-century king of West Francia and Italy (*pictured*) was known as Charles the… what?
4 Which musical was the world's highest-grossing film of 1978?
5 Dave Ball, who died in 2025, was a member of which pop duo?
6 Which organ of the human body produces bile?
7 Between 1985 and 2002, Graham Skidmore provided the voiceover for which Saturday-night show on ITV?
8 In 2003, Rebekah Wade succeeded David Yelland as the editor of which British newspaper?
9 In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, what's the last word of the line that follows: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose"?
10 Which resort city in Arkansas takes its two-word name from the natural phenomena among which it is set?

THE PICTURE ROUND

BY JAMES WALTON

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



Answers opposite

What Fresh Hell

Do politicians need better backstories?

Work, life and family dilemmas solved by *Robert Shrimsley*

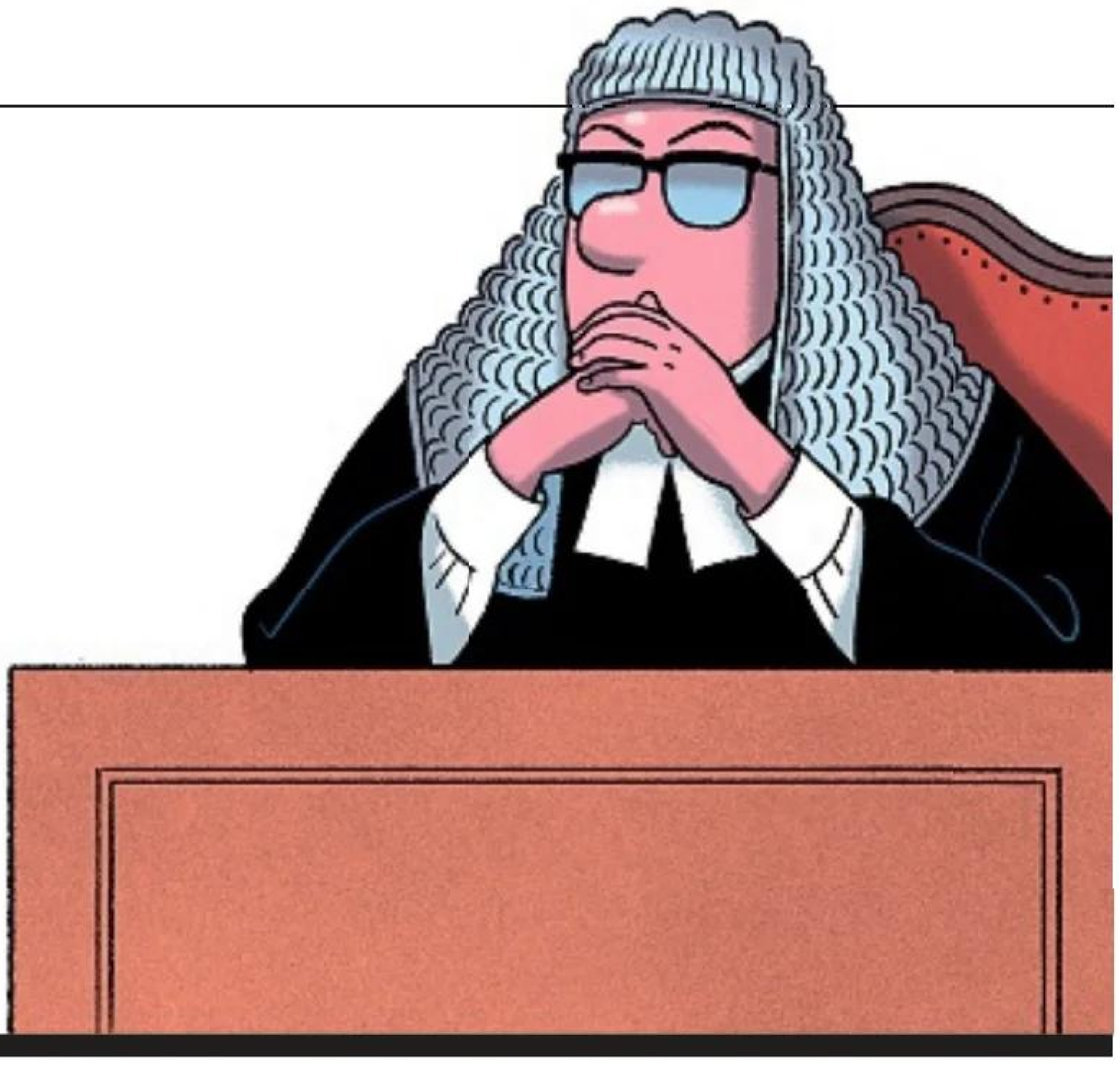


ILLUSTRATION *by* LUCAS VARELA

No, they need better front-stories. This obsession with backstory is now a staple of modern politics. You all know the schtick by now. Politicians competing with each other in a prolier-than-thou contest to prove they are just like us.

I've had several versions of this question. Do our leaders need to be more normal? Do they need to have overcome adversity? Must they have had a "real" job? Must they have lived our values? But all boil down to more leaders with better backstories.

The ideal is an inspiring story of adversity or poverty overcome by force of will. Or failing that some act of heroism which makes them stand out. Announcing Laila Cunningham, as Reform's candidate for Mayor of London, Nigel Farage sought to brand her "vigilante mum" because of an incident when she tried to find the muggers who attacked her child. It's an appealing take even if it amounts to less than a political programme.

In recent weeks, there has been much Labour chatter about the leadership potential of a new MP called Al Carns, who is already a defence minister. This state-school-educated Scot was a Royal Marine Commando who rose to the rank of colonel, and was decorated with the Military Cross for his service in Afghanistan.

You don't get a much better backstory than that, especially on the Labour benches. The only problem is we really don't know if he would be any good as a political leader. To be clear, I'm not saying he isn't PM material, I'm just observing that there isn't yet very much to go on. But it is easy to see why a background like Carns's gets the image-crafters salivating. Who wouldn't want a man of action over, say, a former special adviser or lobbyist? Their history can make them worth a look but it is not the be all and end all.

Voters apparently like authenticity. They want someone they could imagine having a pint with and who is not a life-long political professional, a former special adviser or, for some reason, a lawyer. This is a problem because they also want someone who can manage the almost-impossible job of being a prime minister. I've been for lots of drinks in lots of pubs and I have to say that no one with whom I ever had a casual pint leapt out as the person best placed to run the country.

> No one with whom I ever had a casual pint leapt out as best placed to run the country

Did the fact that Keir Starmer's father was a toolmaker (did you know that?) in any way inform us of the kind of prime minister he might be? And backstory is not always helpful. Sadiq Khan and Sajid Javid share Pakistani immigrant backgrounds and dads who were bus drivers. One is the Labour mayor of London, the other a former Tory chancellor.

Where you came from, especially your adult experience, is not irrelevant. Your story and how you choose to frame it tells us something about you and your values. Support for universal free school meals from the Labour Party reflects the shame some of its working-class ministers were made to feel when getting their subsidised lunch as kids. But where you came from is considerably less important than where you intend to take us.

There is also an inverted snobbery to backstories. In campaign terms, Rishi Sunak had the wrong one. Even though he could boast an ethnic minority background, with his GP and pharmacist parents, he'd had a private school education and a career in the City. Yet actually, a boy from an unremarkable middle-class background, whose family worked to send him to Winchester and who then had his own success, is also a decent story when you think about it, even if it will never make a Hovis ad.

Incidentally, Nigel Farage – the City trader and privately educated son of a stockbroker – has a lousy backstory, almost a tickbox of everything political professionals don't want on their CV. But his party is leading in the polls, partly because (like it or not) he talks about how he plans to fix the country's ills.

In an era of social media, minimal attention and never-ending campaigning, one can see why so much emphasis is placed on image and backstory, the pint in the pub, "are they like me?" question (I don't know, did you win an MC in Afghanistan?). You cannot get past the image-crafting and backstories. But a focus on politicians' pasts rather than their plans for the future helps explain some of the mess the country is in. Vibey politics may be a reality, but "things can only get better" is a campaign song, not a strategy. FT

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